

**CURTIS
HARRINGTON:
THE BITTER AND THE
SWEET**

(From *Penny Blood Issue 7*)

By Harvey F. Chartrand

Director Curtis Harrington – acclaimed for his distinctive brand of elegant horror – emerged from the 1940s West Coast underground film scene, crafting experimental short subjects and working on two projects for the notorious avant-garde filmmaker Kenneth Anger. In the 1950s, Harrington traveled to Paris to assist Cinémathèque Française curator Henri Langlois, parlaying that prestigious experience into a Hollywood gig as assistant producer for Jerry Wald on such hit movies as *Peyton Place*, *Mardi Gras* and *The Long Hot Summer*. Harrington made his debut as a feature film director in 1961 with the evocative *Night Tide*, a dark fantasy set at an oceanfront

amusement park – and a rare example of the perfect fusion of arthouse and exploitation filmmaking. Nobody knew what to make of this offbeat cinematic gem, although *In Cold Blood* author Truman Capote and *Esquire's* film critic Dwight Macdonald sang its praises.

Harrington went on to direct such macabre classics as *Games, What's the Matter with Helen?*, *Whoever Slew Auntie Roo?* and *The Killing Kind*. Among Harrington's best works are *Queen of Blood* (1966), the unnerving vampire-aboard-a-spacecraft epic, and *Ruby* (1977), a harrowing tale of demonic possession and revenge from beyond the grave.

Harrington could have become the next Alfred Hitchcock. Sadly, his films failed at the box office, mainly due to poor marketing and distribution. Harrington was exiled from the major studios in a self-

described descending career arc. To earn a living, he directed several well-received made-for-TV thrillers, among them the masterful *How Awful About Allan*, *The Cat Creature* and *The Dead Don't Die*, and episodes of TV series, including *Wonder Woman*, *Sword of Justice*, *Hotel*, *Charlie's Angels* and the revived *The Twilight Zone*. Eventually, Harrington stopped directing altogether, surfacing now and again as a talking head in a documentary or providing delightful commentary to a DVD release of one of his old pictures.

After a 15-year break, Harrington returned to the director's chair in 2002, helming a 38-minute short film based on Edgar Allan Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher*. Entirely self-financed and shot at the director's outré Hollywood home, *Usher* is a fully realized miniature that conveys the feeling of a bygone era, even though it is

set in contemporary Los Angeles. The hand of the master is still very evident, as *Usher* culminates in one of the most frightening scenes in modern horror cinema. Cleverly made up and costumed to resemble a more mature Edgar Allan Poe, Harrington delivers an enjoyably mannered performance as the doomed poet Roderick Usher.

Harrington is now writing the screenplay and raising production money for a second Poe project – *The Man of the Crowd*. It's the first time that this tale by the Bard of Baltimore will be given a cinematic interpretation.

Penny Blood spoke to Harrington in October.



PENNY BLOOD: Is *Night Tide* becoming the *Citizen Kane* of 1961 – the little movie that could? Its stature continues to grow among audiences and film critics alike. What accounts for its enduring popularity?

HARRINGTON: It is astonishing. At the time, it was just a minor B movie. This was long before the lively days of the independent cinema. *Night Tide* was just meant to be the lower half of a double bill. It was paired with American-International's *The Raven* and received some favorable attention. The film critic for *Time Magazine* wrote a glowing review of *Night Tide*, so it was a *succès d'estime*, but there was no distribution to follow up, to trade on all that good publicity. It was just a whole different scene in 1963. I'm happy to report that *Night Tide* will kick off a new season of film showings at Harvard University Film Archives.

PENNY BLOOD: Tell us about your work on *Peyton Place* (1957) as assistant to the producer Jerry Wald.

HARRINGTON: I worked mainly in the script conferences with screenwriter John Michael Hayes. The final screenplay came out of a brainstorming session with Mark Robson, the director, Jerry Wald, the producer, John Michael Hayes and me.

PENNY BLOOD: You were also an associate producer on the sequel, *Return To Peyton Place* (1961).

CH: The sequel wasn't very successful. Nor was it very good. I got original story credit on *Return to Peyton Place*. I had the idea for the basic storyline. Jerry Wald sent it to Grace Metalious, and she based her novel *Return to Peyton Place* on my outline!

PENNY BLOOD: How do you rate José Ferrer as a director? Why was he given this assignment?

HARRINGTON: José Ferrer was Jerry Wald's choice. Ferrer had directed *The Shrike*, the motion picture version of the Broadway play he starred in. It was Jerry Wald's theory that if Ferrer didn't try to act and direct but just put all his energies into directing, that he would do very well. So Jerry tried him out on *Return to Peyton Place* and it didn't work out. José Ferrer wasn't a very good director. He was first, last and always an actor. Very few actors have become good directors.

PENNY BLOOD: Any memories to share about working with Carol Lynley, Mary Astor and Eleanor Parker on *Return to Peyton Place*?

CH: I had worked with Carol Lynley before on *Hound-Dog Man*, which I was the associate producer of. That was the Fabian vehicle. Don Siegel directed it. Carol had been a model. She was a sweet girl, with a low-key sort of personality, but there was something very passive about her as an

actress. She was not very dynamic. I don't think Carol was a particularly good actress, although she was adequate; but she never blossomed into something exciting or interesting. I had always admired Mary Astor. I had lunch with her on several occasions when she was working on the picture. She was a woman of extraordinary charm and intelligence. I liked her a lot. However, I disliked Eleanor Parker. She was a good actress but a rather disagreeable woman.

PENNY BLOOD: You were an associate producer on *The Stripper* (1963) with Joanne Woodward and Richard Beymer. Was Joanne Woodward miscast, do you think?

HARRINGTON: No, but that film was so cut up by Darryl Zanuck that it was ruined. It was Franklin J. Schaffner's first feature film assignment. He was a tremendously bright and talented man. *The Stripper* episode just broke his heart, because Zanuck came in at the end and hacked that picture to pieces. It doesn't work very well. *The Stripper* was an offbeat movie. It had some musical sequences in it that Zanuck didn't like, so he removed them. In the original cut, the climax had Joanne Woodward attempt to commit suicide. Zanuck found that ending too disagreeable and he cut the whole scene out, so dramatically the film makes no sense, as the whole story led up to that point. Zanuck was out of control by then. Big mid-life crisis. Jerry Wald died during this production, so I supervised the picture's completion, but I really had no say, because every day Richard Zanuck would arrive with some new edict from his father.

Remember that *The Stripper* was the title that the studio added. The film was based on William Inge's play *A Loss of Roses*. Zanuck gave the film a sexy title and took out all the sexy scenes! There was a scene where Joanne was nude and covered in balloons. This scene was used in the ad campaign but most of it was cut from the actual film. The studio decided that Joanne needed larger breasts in this

picture, but they didn't have breast augmentation by surgery in those days. So they made casts of her breasts and made an augmentation in a kind of a sponge rubber with nipples on it. And they glued that onto her breasts! Joanne didn't find this at all embarrassing or unpleasant. She thought it was *so funny*. Joanne was wonderful in the part, but if the film was going to be called *The Stripper*, they should have cast Jayne Mansfield in it.

PENNY BLOOD: Were you pleased with Richard Beymer's performance?

HARRINGTON: I never cared much for him as an actor. I have no opinion really. I liked Claire Trevor, who played Beymer's mother. She was wonderful, a woman of great intelligence and charm.

PENNY BLOOD: In 1966 Roger Corman then engaged you to write a vampire outer space movie. *Queen of Blood* is one of the scariest films ever made. What are some of the tricks of the trade in making a film that truly scares audiences?

HARRINGTON: When it comes to fear, I usually go by instinct. I know what will affect me, but I don't have a formula. I avoid the cheap effect – adding a loud noise to the soundtrack that startles the audience, for example. I still think the Val Lewton approach is the best one, and that is the power of suggestion. What you don't see is more unsettling than what you do see.

PENNY BLOOD: Your as-yet-unproduced *Cranium* would make a frightening tale. Tell us a bit about the story.

CH: It's a classic mad scientist story. In that sense, it's very old-fashioned. It is in the same vein as *Eyes without a Face*,

Georges Franju's horror classic about the mad doctor who is trying to restore his daughter's face by surgery. *Cranium* is about a mad scientist who believes that by certain cranial manipulations, he can increase brain capacity and intelligence. But of course things go terribly wrong.

PENNY BLOOD: You then directed Christopher Jones in two 1966 episodes of the TV series *The Legend of Jesse James* – “A Burying for Rosie” and “The Lonely Place.” Were you surprised that Jones' career was so short-lived?

HARRINGTON: I worked with him at the beginning of his career and he was just fine then. I've always been told that Christopher Jones later took so much LSD that it affected his brain adversely and he became a little crazy. I haven't seen him in all these years and I really don't know what he's like now. At the time I worked with him, he was married to Susan Strasberg. In fact, she gave birth to their child during the shoot. But that child turned out to be retarded. It was very sad. Susan was an adorable person. I loved her. And I liked Christopher very much. He was together at that point, a hard-working actor. He was very James Dean-like and influenced by Dean's acting style. But then he went off the track somewhere...

PENNY BLOOD: I'd like to find out more about *The Four Elements*, a 1966 documentary you made for the United States Information Agency.

HARRINGTON: The USIA does not exist anymore. Its purpose was to make films to be shown around the world, with the narration done in various languages. The USIA promoted all sorts of positive aspects of American life. It was essentially a kind of nationalistic propaganda machine, but in a very positive way. The theme of *The Four Elements*, which was assigned to me, was productivity. I devised the script and had complete creative control over this documentary. *The Four Elements* looked at

how earth, air, fire and water were harnessed for use in manufacturing. We filmed scenes of synthetic textile manufacturing and the process of turning coal into coke, and all that sort of thing. I made a very poetic film about America's industrial might. I shot all the footage in *The Four Elements*. We did not insert any pre-existing footage. My cameraman William Hale subsequently became a very active television director.

PENNY BLOOD: Where can one find *The Four Elements*?

HARRINGTON: You can't. God only knows where USIA films are kept. They were officially never allowed to be shown in the United States, only overseas, the idea being that American taxpayers should not pay money to propagandize our own people. I do have a copy of *The Four Elements* in my personal collection. Unfortunately, it is 16 mm and was printed on Eastman stock, so all the color is gone. It's just pink through and through. Very sad.

PENNY BLOOD: When you directed Anthony Perkins in *How Awful About Allan* (1970), was he somewhat forgotten in Hollywood, after a decade spent working in Europe?

HARRINGTON: Oh no. He had just come off a very big picture. One that was not very successful, but a very big picture: the WW2 story *Catch-22*. My TV-movie marked the first time Tony appeared in a television film. Tony was offered the leading role and he liked the script. I very much enjoyed working with him. Tony was a very bright, witty and amusing guy. He was totally professional, always on the set on time, knew all his lines. All that stage training really paid off. Tony was great. And Julie Harris was his co-star in it. She is one of America's greatest stage actresses. It was a very tight shooting schedule - 10 days - but these fine actors got everything right on the first take. We liked the idea of

putting some of the older people from horror films in it. We got Kent Smith, star of *Cat People*, to play Julie Harris' father. And Robert H. Harris from *How to Make a Monster* played a psychiatrist. We shot *How Awful About Allan* at the old RKO studio, which had by then become part of the Paramount lot. The house exteriors were on the Warner Bros. back lot.

PENNY BLOOD: I understand you did some acting for Orson Welles in 1970.

HARRINGTON: I first met Gary Graver, Welles' favorite cinematographer in his later years, when he worked as an usher at a theatre on Hollywood Boulevard. This is when he was very young, before he became a cameraman. Gary was a film buff and we became friends. I never worked with him until I made *Usher*. We were friends all those years when Gary was working with Orson Welles. Gary would report to me on the experiences he had with Orson. I found all that very exciting. Through Gary, I finally met Orson. We all had dinner together at Ma Maison one night. Then Orson invited me to play myself in his last unfinished film *The Other Side of the Wind*. So I am proud to say that I have actually been directed by Orson Welles. God willing, *The Other Side of the Wind* will be released someday and you'll be able to judge the merit of my performance.

PENNY BLOOD: Did Welles coach you at all?

HARRINGTON: Yes! I wasn't playing a part. I was playing myself. There is a scene where a leading character, a film director subsequently played by John Huston, is at a party of young Hollywood types. He has a chat with various young directors. One of those chaps was me. We did this scene the night before I was to start shooting *What's the Matter with Helen?* I remember thinking... my God, I'll be so tired tomorrow on the first day of shooting, I'll be a wreck. But I couldn't pass up the opportunity to be

in an Orson Welles film. Orson played the part of John Huston offscreen. The only real acting I've done was in *Usher*, filmed much later. I did not consider myself to be an actor. I was very self-conscious even just playing myself! So Orson relaxed me by plying me with Scotch. And yet the next day went very well, as I recall!

I am also one of the few American directors to cast the great Irish actor Micheal MacLiammoir in a film. He played Iago in Orson Welles' version of *Othello*. That evening, it was great to be able to tell Orson that I had engaged his old friend Micheal MacLiammoir to come from Ireland to play the flamboyant elocutionist in *What's the Matter with Helen?* So we chatted quite a bit about Micheal. Orson was presumably discovered as an actor by Micheal MacLiammoir in Dublin at the very beginning of his career. Orson was very fond of Micheal. Coincidentally, John Huston had just cast Micheal in *The Kremlin Letter*.

PENNY BLOOD: Tell us about *Killer Bees*, the 1974 TV-movie you directed. Some critics say that *Killer Bees* is camp. Did you camp this one up, or play it straight?

HARRINGTON: I don't agree at all that it's camp. It's a very serious film. It has humor in it, but that doesn't make it camp. John Waters makes voluntary, calculated camp movies. I don't.

PENNY BLOOD: You gave Gloria Swanson her last great role as Madame Maria von Bohlen in that film. Was she still a trouper at age 77?

HARRINGTON: Oh absolutely. She was wonderful. To be able to work with that magnificent lady was one of the high points of my career. We became very good friends after making the picture. She'd been a big star since she was a teenager. People don't remember or realize what a huge star she was in the silent era. She

was a Cecil B. DeMille star. Her career went back to the teens. Gloria Swanson was as big in her day as Marilyn Monroe was 30 years later. Gloria was also very intelligent. We remained friends until she died in 1983. Of course, I didn't see her very often, because she lived in New York and I live in L.A., but I would always visit whenever I did get to New York. I would drop by her apartment and she would give me tea and we'd have a long chat. Gloria made a point of keeping in touch with me by phone. It was always wonderful to hear her distinctive voice at the other end of the line.

Gloria had a very formal attitude as the star of the picture. She gave out orders before she ever appeared on the set. All the crew had to understand that she had to be addressed as "Miss Swanson." That included me. I would be addressed by her as "Mr. Harrington." We finished the shoot. A day later, I had a reason to call her at her hotel suite. I'll never forget. She came on the phone and I said "Miss Swanson" and before I could say anything more, she said "it's Gloria to you." And that meant that I was up in her esteem and that I was her friend.

And with her ecological awareness, Gloria was not bothered or spooked by the bees. When we put the bees on Kate Jackson, she would just shake and shiver. Whereas Gloria Swanson had no problem when we dumped bees all over her. This didn't bother her in the least. She talked to the bees and gave them her love. Don't ask me if the bees loved her back! Bette Davis was actually the first choice for that role. Bette had more name recognition for TV audiences, but she bowed out because she was absolutely terrified of bees. In fact, Bette was allergic to bee stings and her doctor forbid her to make the picture, even though she really wanted to do it.

PENNY BLOOD: What happened with *The Legend of Lizzie Borden* project in 1975? Why were you replaced by journeyman director Paul Wendkos?

HARRINGTON: I was aced out of *The Legend of Lizzie Borden*. I was given a contract to direct it. I started the whole project, brought in the basic storyline. A writer named William Bast wrote the screenplay. He was a friend of mine. It all turned out well, all thanks to me, really. Then they were able to get the hottest star in television, Elizabeth Montgomery, to agree to star in it. From that moment on, my days were numbered. Elizabeth Montgomery was handled by the William Morris Agency. I was not. The William Morris Agency took advantage of the situation to ace out Harrington and get one of their own directors in on it. Later, I met Elizabeth Montgomery and she told me she didn't put pressure on anyone to get rid of me, but I'm sure that is what William Morris told the producers, that replacing me with Paul Wendkos was what the star wanted. This is all typical Hollywood skullduggery! They ousted me improperly and illegally. They had no right to do it, so I went to the Directors Guild and brought an arbitration proceeding against Paramount Television. And I won it. I was paid my full salary. But this was an important project for my career that could have led to more TV-movie and feature film assignments. This sad business caused a rupture in my friendship with Bill Bast, because he just rolled over and played dead. He didn't fight to protect me, to keep me on the project.

PENNY BLOOD: With *The Dead Don't Die* (1975), were you allowed to make a TV-movie that was more shocking than the standard TV horror fare of that era?

HARRINGTON: Not that I'm aware of. The script was vetted by NBC Standards and Practices. I really wanted Reggie Nalder to play the zombie. Nalder was known as the Ugliest Man in Hollywood. He played the assassin in Alfred Hitchcock's remake of *The Man Who Knew Too Much*. I had my heart set on Nalder, but the producer wanted somebody else. I insisted and I got Reggie Nalder. I was very happy about that. His face was like something out of a nightmare. He looked like the Phantom of the Opera. I felt so sorry for him, though.

He asked me one day: "Why can't I play a leading man?" And I thought: "Man, you're just not self-aware!" (*Laughs*)

PENNY BLOOD: How did you get such a big name as George Hamilton to star in *The Dead Don't Die*. Were you pleased with his performance?

HARRINGTON: That was the network's idea. It was the lead role and George agreed to do it. I think he is very good in *The Dead Don't Die*. I like George personally very much. He's a very nice, bright fellow.

PENNY BLOOD: Why did you start directing series television more often as of 1975?

HARRINGTON: You might say that my career was on a downward arc, because of the Hollywood attitude. I had directed some features, but none of them were blockbusters. So I was not terribly in favor. There were two or three pictures that I came very close to making. I could talk for hours about why they all fell through. So finally, I asked my agent to get me a job directing a TV-movie. Well, the attitude was: "He's a feature director. He can't direct TV-movies." Finally my agent got me a job on *The Cat Creature*. From then on, it was: "Oh, he can only do made-for-TV movies. He can't do any features." Once you make the breakthrough, you can't go back. And once I started directing episodic TV, they wouldn't let me do anything else – not even TV-movies! That was the system and the attitude in Hollywood in those days.

PENNY BLOOD: How did you manage to direct a peculiar talent like Timothy Carey in *What's the Matter with Helen?* (1971) and in "Set Up City," a 1975 episode of *Baretta*?

HARRINGTON: I'm in that little club that includes Stanley Kubrick and John Cassavetes: directors who admired Timothy Carey for his uniqueness. The thing about Timothy was that he was as eccentric offscreen as on. That eccentricity is what we all loved, but it was not entirely controllable. Producers did not like to work with Timothy because he never did two takes the same way. The only way I got him on "Set Up City" was because the star of the show, Bobby Blake, gave his approval. But I adored Timothy Carey and was very happy to have him play a tramp in *What's the Matter with Helen?* and a criminal in "Set Up City." He was very inventive. He would ad-lib extra lines. Some of them were so funny that I would burst out laughing in the middle of a take. Of course, my laugh was on the soundtrack so we'd have to do another take, which was kind of embarrassing.

There's a scene in "Set Up City" where Timothy roughs up a used car salesman. Timothy was a bit out of control because he really hurt the other actor who later sued through the Screen Actors' Guild. When I first met Timothy, I was terrified of him. I couldn't imagine that I'd ever work with him. But he knew who I was. One day I ran into him on the Fox lot and he hugged me and said: "Oh Curtis, you are the greatest, man! You're the best!" I realized that he really liked me and I had nothing to fear. (*Laughs*) So I took him into my heart.

PENNY BLOOD: In 1977, you directed "Stargate," an episode of the short-lived TV series *Logan's Run*, based on the hit movie.

HARRINGTON: The line producer, Leonard Katzman, was a very unpleasant man. He was subsequently the executive producer of the series *Dallas*. I would never be hired to work on *Dallas* because Katzman for some reason hated me on sight. The day I showed up on the set of *Logan's Run*, Katzman told me he did not like me. Even though we had never met before, he had already made up his mind

about me. Katzman was an uncouth lowbrow character. He thought that my work was too elegant, fancy and special. Katzman just hated that sort of thing. He told me right away he didn't want me on the show. I was only hired because the executive producers, Ivan Goff and Ben Roberts, wanted me. From then on, Katzman and I were just at loggerheads. If I said up, he said down. I wanted Mickey Rooney for a small supporting role and Katzman imposed a nonentity of an actor, Eddie Firestone, who was a personal friend of his. Firestone then gave a terrible performance, and Katzman blamed me for it! At least Paul Carr was in the show. He was a fine actor and a personal friend of mine. And Gregory Harrison, the star of *Logan's Run*, was a very nice fellow.

PENNY BLOOD: Describe how you filmed the "spider-walk" sequence in *Ruby* (1977). Was this done because a similar scene was cut from the original version of *The Exorcist*?

HARRINGTON: You must be talking about the hysterical arch. I had seen a scene like that in a Luis Buñuel film called *Nazarin*. I've never forgotten it. I had also become aware of the idea of the hysterical arch in the paintings of Salvador Dali. I imagine that it is written about in Freud. That back-bend effect – that's what it is called, "the hysterical arch." So I asked the actress, who was young and nimble, to do it for me. It was all my idea. Unfortunately, my cameraman on *Ruby* was unpleasant and did lousy work. Even so, *Ruby* has a certain cachet in Europe. I don't really know why. Leni Riefenstahl once told me that she loved it! That is praise from Caesar. But *Ruby* remains a big pain in my heart, because it really could have been quite good if the producer hadn't fucked it over.

PENNY BLOOD: *Ruby* is set in 1951. The drive-in theater in the film shows *Attack of the 50 Foot Woman*, made seven years

later. Did you point out this anachronism to producer Steve Krantz?

HARRINGTON: No. All I remember is that the story took place in the fifties. *Attack of the 50 Foot Woman* was a fifties movie. We just generalized and weren't concerned with the actual chronology. It was a generic fifties ambience that we created: drive-ins, hot rods, full skirts on the girls, the typical fifties look and attitudes, whatever...

PENNY BLOOD: In 1979, you once again directed Julie Harris in an episode of *Vega\$* entitled *Kill Dan Tanna!* Tell us about the scenes set in Vietnam. They are quite convincing.

HARRINGTON: They were done on the backlot at Fox. I was in Las Vegas for a week or more, but I don't think the war scenes were shot there. I remember we shot it at night on the backlot. You don't have many opportunities to add personal touches to a series episode. They just hand you the script and you're supposed to shoot it as written. Occasionally I was allowed to inject some of my own ideas into a script. There was an episode of *Dynasty* in which Blake and Krystle go to South America for their honeymoon. They did the whole thing in dialogue with a scene of them on a plane going to Brazil. I convinced the producers to add footage of glamorous locations. I said to them: "My god, this is a glamorous show. You've got to have a scene where Blake and Krystle arrive at a fabulous hotel and a scene of them dancing together after they come back from a nightclub. Very romantic." The producers thought that was a wonderful idea. So they called in the writers and all my ideas were written down into scenes. That was one time I made a really major contribution to an episode. We didn't fly down to Rio. We rented a spread-out residential hotel with garden, walkways and patios in the Wilshire district.

PENNY BLOOD: What were some of the compensations of directing episodes of

Dynasty and *The Colbys*, instead of cherished film projects like *Cranium* and *The Pyx*?

HARRINGTON: Directing *The Colbys* allowed me to work with Barbara Stanwyck. That's what made it all worthwhile for me personally. She was such a magnificent actress and such a remarkable movie star. I got along extremely well with her. She was in her late seventies but completely sharp. I worked a lot with Charlton Heston. I never mentioned our political differences. He is a man of great personal charm and I got along with him very well.

PENNY BLOOD: You are identified as a horror director, and yet your body of work is quite diverse. Any comments?

HARRINGTON: That diversity came about more by necessity. I made horror films for video, but all that broke down once I started doing episodic television. But I was happy to show my versatility at the time, and to work with people like Joan Collins, Chuck Heston and above all, Barbara Stanwyck. That is one of the high points of my career, even though it was only in episodic television. She was such a wonderful person and just happened to be one of the movie stars I have most admired through the years. I could hardly believe my luck to be able to work with this legendary actress. I felt very much the same way about Gloria Swanson too.

PENNY BLOOD: What accounts for your lifelong obsession with Edgar Allan Poe?

HARRINGTON: I feel a deep kinship with Poe. I discovered his writings when I was a teenager in high school, and I felt a very profound affinity with his preoccupations, style, personality and looks. I responded favorably to everything about Poe. He became the first and most important culture hero in my life and career. That affinity is inexplicable. Sometimes I think in

my heart of hearts that I might be a reincarnation of Edgar Allan Poe. I don't attach much weight to that. It's just a fancy. The reason I played Roderick Usher in the film is not because I have an actor's ego but because I wanted Usher to be like a close facsimile to Poe himself. There are those who say I bear a slight resemblance to Edgar Allan Poe. That's one of the reasons I played the role in the film.

I was never overly impressed by cinematic interpretations of Edgar Allan Poe. I never thought the Roger Corman Poe films were very good. For one thing, Poe is primarily a short story writer. He has written essays about his approach to writing the short story, a very specific medium. There is a great difference between a novel and a short story. So if you extend any Poe short story into a feature-length movie, it means that you have to pack it with all sorts of additional material. Therefore, it vitiates the source. And that is why when I made my film *Usher*, I tried to be very pure about it. Short story... short film, not filled with a lot of padding.

PENNY BLOOD: What's the latest scoop on your new film based on Poe's tale *The Man of the Crowd*?

HARRINGTON: I'm still in the process of searching for sufficient financing to make the film. Minimally, I'll need one hundred thousand dollars. That would be making it in the rather primitive way that I made *Usher*. If I made it under regular circumstances, I'd need about one million dollars. We've applied to a foundation for a \$250,000 grant. I am also appealing to three personal friends who are multimillionaires. I've sent them copies of the script. A well-off businessman friend of mine said he would contribute \$25,000 towards *The Man of the Crowd*. That's a start! I will also rely on volunteer UCLA film students to help me make the picture.

PENNY BLOOD: Describe the look you envision for *The Man of the Crowd*. How will you capture the gloomy fin-de-siècle Poe ambience in sunny sprawling Los Angeles?

HARRINGTON: I'll be shooting in some very odd locations that you don't ordinarily see on the screen. In East Los Angeles, there are many decaying Victorian houses and I'll be using some of those... I'm going to shoot part of *The Man of the Crowd* in an industrial no man's land that is rich with visual possibilities. I'm contemporizing the story, as I did in *Usher*. I'm trying to show the universality of Poe's tales, how they are absolutely timeless. I don't know any other filmmakers who've done that with Poe. All the other cinema adaptations of Poe take place in the mid 19th century.

If I make *The Man of the Crowd* on that low a budget, I can't afford to have any name actors in it. I will need a very good actress for the part of the mysterious woman in the scene in the church. I have someone in mind for it, Sally Kellerman, but I won't approach her until the financing is in place. I need a really high-style emotional actress for that part. Sally would be perfect!

I want *The Man of the Crowd* to be the culmination of my career as a filmmaker. I'm very excited and proud of this project. This Poe story, which has *never* been filmed before, really resonates with me. *The Man of the Crowd* is actually the frame story for what I'm making. It's the frame from which hang excerpts from two other Poe tales: *William Wilson* and *The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar*.

PENNY BLOOD: What do you say to those moneymen who might claim that, at 79, you're too old to direct a film?

HARRINGTON: A lot of artists have done astonishing work in their later years. The great architect Frank Lloyd Wright was in his eighties when he designed New York City's Guggenheim Museum. I can assure you that I am at the peak of my artistic

powers: *The Man of the Crowd* will be astonishing.

PENNY BLOOD: You are writing an autobiography. How will it be structured? Will it be a chronological history? A tell-all account of your life in Hollywood?

HARRINGTON: I've known a lot of celebrities personally who really have no direct relationship to my film career. So there will be alternating chapters dealing with my films in chronological order and then with some personalities I have known very well, like James Whale, Gore Vidal, Anaïs Nin and Josef von Sternberg. I've just done a piece on the Baroness D'Erlanger, who was a very good friend of mine. She is not famous, but in the history of art she is well known, because one of her claims to fame is that she was the person who paid for [ballet impresario Sergei] Diaghilev's funeral in 1929 in Venice. My own reminiscence of her is very entertaining. She was quite a character.

PENNY BLOOD: Tell us about your contribution to *Gods and Monsters* (1998), about the last days of *Frankenstein* director James Whale. You had a walk-on in a party scene, as I recall. You wore a lovely Panama suit.

HARRINGTON: I am a personal friend of the writer and director Bill Condon. My only contribution to *Gods and Monsters* was to provide a few anecdotes to Sir Ian McKellan as he prepared to play the role of James Whale. I reminisced about my friendship with James Whale, gave McKellan a few insights into Whale's personality. I spent a whole afternoon with Sir Ian and we hit it off very well. He is an extremely likable and interesting man. So that was the extent of my involvement in the production. I think I have a screen credit of some sort.

Bill had arranged for us to visit the residence of James Whale, which subsequently through the years was owned by different people, including Goldie Hawn. So when we went through the house, I recognized the changes, and I remember saying to Sir Ian: "I can see that

this house has been Goldie Hawn-ed.”
(Laughs)

PENNY BLOOD: What happened with the *Let's Kill Santa Claus* project?

HARRINGTON: It was just a quick little two-day shoot for a 10-minute video. Essentially, I directed it with no credit. I was just helping a young actor friend, Jerry G. Angelo. *Let's Kill Santa Claus* was a showcase for his talents. Jerry put the whole thing together. I agreed to direct *Let's Kill Santa Claus* as a kindness to him, but it was not my film. Jerry has no money to speak of, so after we shot the video, he couldn't even afford to hire an editor for it, so I doubt we'll ever see *Let's Kill Santa Claus*. And if it ever is released, it certainly won't have my name on it.

PENNY BLOOD: What are some of the latest horror movies that you admire?

HARRINGTON: I was very impressed by Jan Svankmajer's *Lunacy*, a horror puppet show based on works by Poe and the Marquis de Sade. I made a point of seeing *Silent Hill*, but it was very disappointing to me. It didn't turn out very well, even though it had an actress in it who I like very much – Alice Krige. She played the leader of an insane cult, but even she was beaten by the script. I liked *The Illusionist*, although I thought the ending just fell apart completely. Except for that, I enjoyed the film. I thought Edward Norton gave a lovely performance. *The Illusionist* was beautifully photographed by Dick Pope.

PENNY BLOOD: You are an avid filmgoer. You see a film just about every day.

HARRINGTON: As a member of the Academy [of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences] and the Directors Guild [of America], I get to attend weekly screenings of many new films. But there are an awful

lot of films I have no interest in seeing. It seems to me that films are getting worse all the time. Maybe it's because my taste has matured in such a way that I really only want to see something special. But I dutifully went to see *Superman Returns* and *World Trade Center*. I like Oliver Stone's work, I'm one of the few people who liked *Alexander*, but this was a completely predictable film... It will have a certain commercial success, I suppose. That's something directors have to do regularly to keep producers' faith in them alive. Another new film I've seen that I like very much is *Factotum*. It has a wonderful performance by Matt Dillon as author Charles Bukowski's alter ego, it's probably the best thing Dillon has ever done. *Factotum* has a certain kind of dry humor that I like very much.

PENNY BLOOD: You may well be the only experimental filmmaker in the USA who made the transition to become a celebrated director of feature films. Do you agree/disagree with this observation?

HARRINGTON: I think it is basically true, because all of my contemporaries like Kenneth Anger, Maya Deren, Stan Brakhage and James Broughton, none of them pursued a career in commercial filmmaking. I seem to be the only one. In making the transition, I had the support and help of a wonderful and largely forgotten film director named Albert Lewin, who was at MGM and directed *The Picture of Dorian Grey* with Hurd Hatfield. Albert admired my short films and he helped me start my Hollywood career. He was a private collector of surrealist paintings, so it's no surprise that he liked my work.

PENNY BLOOD: What else is coming up next for Curtis Harrington?

HARRINGTON: I never stop trying new angles to get the money to make my films, you know... I've decided to go out and buy a laptop and get an e-mail address and hopefully this will get me more into the

mainstream, because I'm out of the mainstream now. I may also create a website to remind people that I'm still around.