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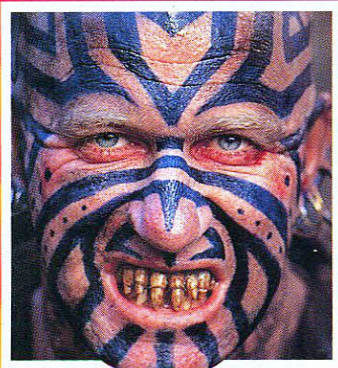
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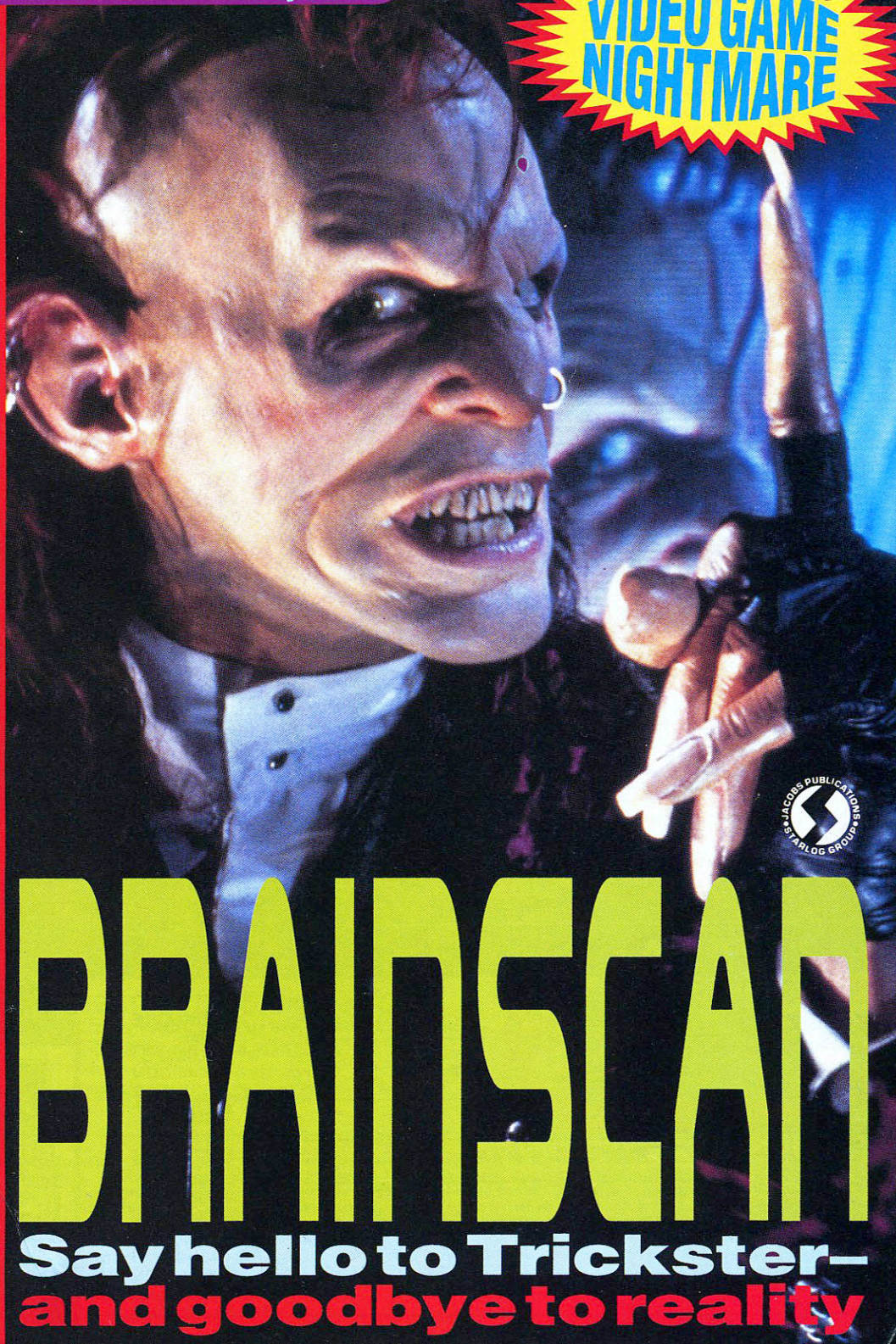
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BRAINSCAN

**Say hello to Trickster—
and goodbye to reality**



Belying its title, Leif Jonker's *Darkness* sheds plenty of light on gruesome Gary Miller FX.

THE

Unbound by Hollywood formulas, these up-and-comers are making personal horror movies their way.

By MICHAEL GINGOLD

Not too long ago, it seemed that anyone seeking an alternative to "safe" studio horror could find plentiful solace with independent distributors, which kept movie screens filled with daring American chillers and taboo-busting Italian imports. But things have changed in the last 10 years; the Italo horror scene has dried up, many indies have folded and those that still exist seem content to churn out a numbing series of numbered movies.

Nowadays, the films most likely to take their terror seriously are being made by the real independents, enterprising up-and-comers working well outside the mainstream who are financing personal horror projects out of their own pockets. Destined for likely limited video exposure (and often shot in that format), these "homemade horrors" are often put together with more conviction than "low-budget" titles getting much wider cassette release.

One of the most thematically ambitious of this new crop is *Shatter Dead*, a Long Island-lensed tale of a young woman making her way through a world overrun by zombies. But these walking dead are far removed from those found in your typical Romero-influenced film. "They don't eat people, and they're no more destructive than real people generally are," explains writer/director Scooter McCrae. "That's what the movie's really about—there's almost no difference between zombies and living people, but there are rigid class structures set up between them."

VIDEO DEAD

"When I was first writing the script, it was a much more traditional blood-and-guts zombie film," he continues. "And I felt it was avoiding the biggest issue of all, which is death itself. The horror of being eaten alive is secondary to the dread people have of being dead someday. That's a fear everyone has, it's so primal. Suddenly I was writing from that perspective, and it came out pretty easily." This cerebral approach doesn't preclude numerous outbursts of shocking violence, though; it just means that much of it is committed upon the talking, thinking, feeling undead. (The FX were created by Pericles Lewnes, who helped launch the video gore genre with 1987's *Redneck Zombies*.)

Explicit bloodshed is, in fact, a common thread uniting most of this breed of indies, and perhaps none is redder than *Darkness*, a gruesome vampire film written, produced and directed by Wichita, Kansas filmmaker Leif Jonker. "It's definitely a gorehound's movie," he says. "It culminates with probably the biggest meltdown sequence in a vampire movie ever, with I believe a world record for exploding heads. We had 50 extras, and used about 150 gallons of blood for that scene alone."

Jonker shot his epic, about a nomadic vampire named Liven who transforms practically the entire population of a small town into bloodsuckers, on Super-8 film and transferred it to tape. He claims that shooting on video was never a consideration. "I felt that I had to do it on film," he says. "It's really the best way to start. Whether it's Super-8 or

16mm, you have to cut your teeth on the real thing."

That's how Akron, Ohio's J.R. Bookwalter made his own leap into the splatter field. His zombie shocker *The Dead Next Door* was shot on Super-8 and, like *Darkness*, took nearly four years to complete. On the strength of *Dead*, Bookwalter was hired by David DeCoteau to produce

"starts to see the world a little differently and goes through bizarre transformations."

Not only is *Ozone* the biggest of Bookwalter's post-*Dead Next Door* video movies, it's the first he's happy with. "Everything from *Robot Ninja* on down was something that somebody was paying me to work on or make for them," he explains. "They were being

made to fill a niche, not because I wanted them to exist. On this one I took the approach that I started with on *Dead Next Door*, where I set off on my own, and did it myself for whatever funds I had available."

The self-financing route can certainly pose its share of technical challenges, but it also results in complete creative freedom, which allows the filmmakers to be as extreme and occasionally perverse as they want. This holds particularly true for *Shatter Dead*, which opens with a young woman having sex with a female angel and features what McCrae describes as "a shotgun abortion," and even moreso for *Original Sins*, a project McCrae is acting in that, like *Shatter Dead*, is being shot on professional-level video. As McCrae is put into makeup for his role as the demon Kaps, writer/directors Matthew Howe (*Shatter Dead*'s director of pho-



No good-looking young actress is safe on the world of low-budget horror. (Lotte V. Anne in Pericles Lewnes makeup for *Shatter Dead*)

tography) and Howard Berger ("not the makeup artist") take a break on the Staten Island set to discuss their venture into down-and-dirty horror. "It's about three Catholic girls who are immaculately violated by a presence they believe is Jesus Christ," Howe begins. "Every time they come out of their delirium they feel more religiously inspired, but

and direct movies for his Cinema Home Video line, which led to a pair of 16mm productions, *Robot Ninja* and *Skinned Alive*, a slew of shot-on-video titles and the formation of Bookwalter's own Tempe Video company. His latest creation is *Ozone*, in which a detective on the trail of the title drug winds up injected with it and, in Bookwalter's words,



Scooter McCrae relaxes with his actresses behind the scenes on *Shatter Dead*...

what's really happening is that they're being taken over by an alien that's making them go through an increasing series of debaucheries and violent acts. One of the girls falls in love with this creature she believes to be Christ, and another, who has a secret lesbian love for this girl, decides she has to stop her friend from giving herself to this presence. And the third girl, the most naturally holy of the three, is assaulted by her uncle, who's a priest, and it turns out—well, we can't give away the ending."

And that doesn't even get into the subplot being shot today, in which a trio of devil-obsessed metalheads perform a ritual with the corpse of a virgin and wind up raising Kaps

from the netherworld. He's not your traditional demon (for one thing, he wears glasses), but in order to impress these amateur satanists, he appears sporting a red, bald head and horns, being given an intentionally tacky look by makeup FX artist Josh Turi. The rest of Turi's work is being played straight for maximum grotesquerie, but Berger insists the film isn't going for cheap shocks. "We're not interested in exploitation, we're interested in making a very perverse entertainment," he says. "The stronger the content, the stronger the meaning behind it. It's what I call contextually rationalized exploitation."

Bookwalter, too, has never had to deal with creative restraint put upon



...and vamps it up as Kaps on the set of *Original Sins*.

him, even on the movies he's done for others. Yet he points out that *Ozone*, even though it's all his, may be less extreme than his previous work. "Oddly enough, the gorier stuff I did was for other people, and it's strange that nobody ever told me, 'You can't do this,'" he says. "I'm used to doing whatever I want, and I could have done anything I wanted on *Ozone*, but I just sort of restrained myself. It was originally intended to be much bloodier, but through the course of production, we tended to go for the weirder elements than the straight-out gore."

The result is a film packed with many and varied FX, including bizarre character makeups, full-body prosthetics and even a couple of morphing scenes, all on a budget that probably wouldn't have paid for *Terminator 2*'s catering. Bookwalter created the digital FX himself on his Amiga computer system, and farmed out the makeup work to such previous collaborators as Bill Morrison and David Barton. "We all sort of stepped back to our roots and worked on a percentage basis to get this thing made," he explains. "The costs were nominal. At this point, we knew so much about what we were doing that it was pretty much cut-and-dried; we knew we had to get this much foam latex and so forth."

When Jonker set out to shoot *Darkness*, he had the advantage of casting his special FX man as his lead actor: Gary Miller, who plays a youthful Van Helsing type out to stop Liven's rampage. "Gary's a good actor, but he and I both know the reason he got the role was that I



They never taught her about vampires at the police academy.

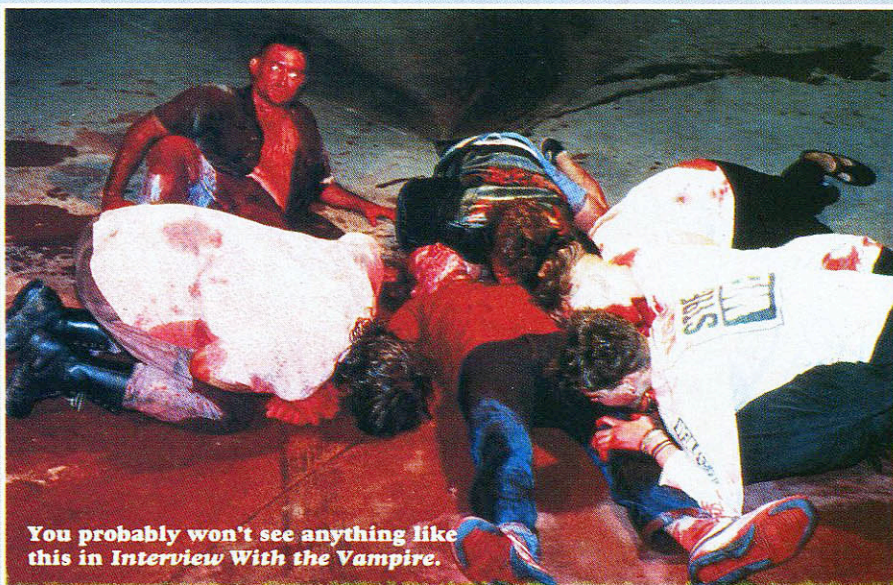
could depend on him to show up for filming," Jonker says. "And the fact that he was a good enough actor allowed us to decide that it would be worth the trouble of him both doing the effects and starring in it. Because that was a lot of work; there were over 100 effects shots in the film. But ultimately, it worked out because of his dedication. He's really the only other hardcore horror fan I've met in Kansas."

Jonker wasn't quite as lucky with some of his other cast. As with most films of this type, *Darkness*' budget didn't allow for the cast to be paid, and there were conflicts with the actors' jobs. "Everyone was working full-time," he recalls, "so sometimes we'd go two weeks and not shoot at all. Then we'd get together and try to get everybody's schedule to work out, and we'd shoot for literally an hour and a half or two hours. And sometimes, even at that point, people wouldn't show up. I remember one night it was 2 a.m., and I had 50 extras ready to shoot a scene, and my actors got tied up and never showed. So I was standing there in the middle of the night with these 50 people I didn't know ready to chase our heroes, and I just shot cutaways of them running up and down the street. You gotta do what you gotta do."

If getting actors to work for free is one thing, convincing them to perform for nothing in a sexually explicit film like *Shatter Dead* might seem impossible. One particular love scene, involving a girl, a guy and a gun, would seem to be enough to give any actor pause. But McCrae claims that he had no trouble casting the movie. "The trick is to find good actors and actresses to do the scenes," he says. "In this particular case, they were all friends, and

**"You need tons of equipment for a proper film shoot, but with video you can just go out and do it."
—Scooter McCrae**

one thing that was a real advantage was that when I showed them the script, they were reading it as friends and understood what I was going for. There was really no problem, which surprised me, because when I handed the script to people I was saying, 'I understand if you never want to speak to me again, but take a look at this, I'm thinking of you for a part.' And most of them considered it a compliment."



You probably won't see anything like this in *Interview With the Vampire*.

Although they cast several *Shatter Dead* performers in *Original Sins*, Howe and Berger did run into resistance when searching for the girl who would undergo the movie's most grueling action. "We told the actresses we were interested in exactly what they were going to have to do, and they said, 'OK, no problem,'" Howe remembers. "Then we gave them the script, and they called back and said, 'No, I can't do this.' They said they didn't know it was going to be so real."

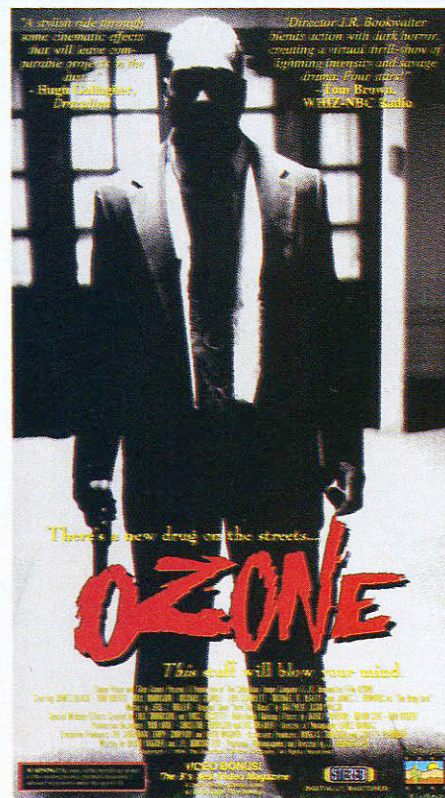
"I would ask them if it was the nudity that was a problem, because we could work around that, and they said no, it was the context," adds Berger. "They would actually rather be killed off in a shower than go through a wrenching experience that was going to be handled in a very graphic and emotionally distressing way. They didn't want to put themselves through that."

Convincing a distributor that a wide audience will pay to witness such unspeakable acts can pose an equally thorny problem once a movie is completed. Getting a very low-budget movie released in the incredibly shrinking horror video marketplace is no easy task, though Bookwalter has the advantage of running Tempe Video himself. "I made all my distribution mistakes on the other movies I've released," he says. "I knew what I was going to get out of *Ozone* financially, so I went in with some sort of business plan. I was able to make a movie that I knew fit within a certain situation and wasn't going to be a financial risk."

Bookwalter also plans to scale down Tempe's output; the company, along with his secondary Video Outlaw label, has released a couple of dozen independent productions in the last year or so, and even he admits that some of them have been

lacking. "There was a general dislike on my part for a lot of the stuff I was selling, and starting with *Ozone* [which debuted earlier this year], I'll be distributing fewer titles," he says. "The B market is shrinking to the point where it's hard to get any headway. If I had \$100,000 to throw at each movie to promote it, I'd probably be very successful, but I don't have access to that kind of money."

One might expect that the low-budget look of a self-financed project would be the major stumbling block in finding distribution, but according to Jonker, such was not necessarily the case with *Darkness*. "We didn't tell people we had shot on





Ozone's Drug Lord (James L. Edwards) is a pretty good argument for Just Saying No.



Unlike most movie zombies, McCrae's undead are generally on the receiving end of the gory violence.

Super-8; some of them could spot it, but many didn't," he reveals. "Usually our biggest problem was that we had no name star, and the second was that there was no sex in the film. Then it started coming down to production value."

And, of course, there was also concern in a few cases over the movie's graphic violence. "One distributor offered me a decent deal for the film, but he wanted to cut several scenes," Jonker recalls. "The car wash scene, where Chris Michael's throat is ripped out, and his artery sprays up and blasts the ceiling, is one of the most visceral and confident scenes in the movie. It always rocks the hell out of the audience. And he wanted to cut that completely. It was a very tempting offer as far as the money, but I ultimately said no, because that was one of the strengths of the movie." Jonker eventually struck a domestic deal with Film Threat Video, and rather surprisingly, Blockbuster has agreed to carry the tape, asking only for an alternative to the gory box art.

But the visual look can still be

a sticking point with distributors, many of whom are leery of releasing anything with a shot-on-video appearance. Although he shot *Ozone* on tape, Bookwalter ran it through the Filmlook process, which gives the images a more filmlike density, before releasing the movie. His experiences on *Dead Next Door* have convinced him that in his budget range, video is the way to go. "Super-8 is what I call high-maintenance," he says. "If it's not shot or transferred to video right, it can look really bad, and it's easy to shoot hundreds of rolls of film, wait three weeks for the processing to be done, and get back something that looks too dark. When you shoot on video, you can hook up a monitor and see exactly what you're getting."

McCrae seconds the motion. "I was brought up on film, and was very leery and suspicious of video at first," he says. "A lot of my friends were saying, 'If you can't shoot on film, why shoot?' And I found that that's a really stupid attitude; it's not the medium you're working in, it's the story you're telling. After I did *Shatter Dead*, suddenly everyone was saying, 'My God, this looks great,' and now they're shooting on video and getting projects off the ground. You need tons of equipment for a proper film shoot, but with video you can just go out and do it."

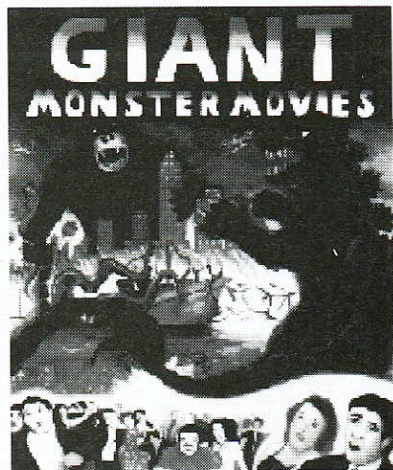
Not surprisingly, Jonker remains a staunch supporter of Super-8. "Using this format, there's no reason someone couldn't yield a film that looks as good as, say, *Terminator 2*," he says. "I know that sounds totally blowhard and bullshit, but the potential is there. You have to light it like you're shooting any professional film. I've seen movies shot on high-end video, which gives you a good, clean picture, but you can't pretend it's not video. Film gives you the depth and the warmth, and has a lot more life to it."

But when you cut to the bottom line, it's really the content that counts, and that's where these burgeoning filmmakers believe they have a chance to stand out. To a one, they decry the current state of mainstream fright fare. "The market seems to be shrinking every year, instead of growing," says Bookwalter, whose next project is the supernatural tale *Seven Body Parts Six Feet Under*. "Other people have ruined it for us; things like the *Nightmare on Elm Street* and *Friday the 13th* sequels have done more harm than good for the genre."

"Nobody's making the type of films that I want to see right now," Jonker adds. "Nobody's trying to make movies that are truly scary. I

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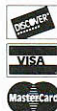
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INDIES

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remember seeing *Dawn of the Dead* when I was 12, and it was a real rollercoaster ride from hell. But in the '80s things became so redundant, with ripoff artists repeating the previous efforts of other people, and there was no real passion to the films that were coming out. Now there are people who were raised on the really visceral thrills of those '70s movies, and have a goal of making horror films. Hopefully, eventually, we'll have the means to get more money and prove our worth as filmmakers, and real horror movies will be hot again."

"There is no horror genre without the independents, and they're completely screwed over now," McCrae says. "They're supplying us with nothing except films with numbers in the title. It's just not the climate, politically or economically, for someone to spend \$2 million and say, 'Go make a horror movie that's going to make people shit their pants.' I really feel that it's going to be someone with a camcorder, a functioning brain and some talented friends who are going to make the next great horror film." The director has signed a deal with Bookwalter for Tempe Video to release *Shatter Dead*, and he's not at all anxious to move up into the megabuck leagues. "Any horror film that costs more than a couple million dollars is just asking for trouble, in terms of the kind of scrutiny it's going to be put under. When you reach a certain budget level, it's gonna drain you, and you're not going to be able to make the film you wanted to make in the first place."

For now, these young auteurs are willing and able to prove themselves on low budgets. "I think the video revolution is the new pulp novel," Howe notes, "where people are allowed to work under incredibly low-budget circumstances and do whatever they want. With the new cable and video systems, there's a huge appetite for product, and it's a good opportunity for filmmakers to make movies for little money that are very intensely personal and interesting to them."

"It shouldn't be treated like a commercial product," Berger adds, "it should be a good little story where it doesn't matter what it was shot on. I want to get people interested in the ideas, not just the formula of the genre, and try to transcend that and make the genre worth watching again. Horror films were horrifying once, and that's what we're trying to do now."

BRAINSCAN

(continued from page 45)

we define it does not yet exist—the Brainscan tapes which mix virtual reality with hypnosis—but I have no doubt that this will come about one of these days." As for the cost of this hi-tech venture, all Roy will say is that it's "expensive," without confirming the rumored budget of \$6-8 million.

The producer contends that the goal of *Brainscan*'s makers was to make an intelligent movie about kids who love playing with danger. "You give 16-year-olds a car today and say, 'Drive 50 miles an hour,' and they say, 'Sure,' and drive 90 miles an hour," he says. "That was what we wanted to show; it's much more than a thriller with fancy graphics. The story is more important, actually, than the graphics, and we're not doing special effects for the sake of special effects." He backs up Allen's claims, however, that the computerized visuals will be the most advanced ever seen.

Roy says that when he began the project, he asked himself, "How do you play with horror, what are the limits?" And he decided that, in this case, the limits had to be far-reaching. The element of surprise is key in *Brainscan*, he insists, promising that the audience will be kept on their toes throughout, uncertain whether what they're viewing is real or a fantasy.

The young man at the center of this dual reality is hard to track down, but Furlong is finally found relaxing in his trailer in the lot out front. He's not as caught up with the production values as the others, but does point out that they affected the way he played his role. "There are a lot of neat effects," he says, "and I was really challenged to act because I had to imagine what the Trickster looked like on screen initially; it was all bluescreen at first. It's a pretty weird experience."

Furlong notes that his character has more dimensions than the one he played in his previous genre film, *Pet Sematary II*. "Yet he's also a lot like the ones I normally play, because he's dweeby and different," the T2 actor points out. "Where he departs the most is that I've never played a part where I was really rich—that's one thing I can think of," he laughs. "But he's an average kid, really, who turns into an un-average kid. He has to deal with a lot. He has to grow up in the movie, and that's really hard to do."

"I think fans will be really excited when they see this film," Furlong concludes. "It's really cool."