

# The Making of THE AGE OF INSECTS

article by Laurie Woods

*The Age of Insects* was initially conceived in 1984. It is due to director/producer/guerilla filmmaker Eric Marano's undying dedication, patience and, perhaps most importantly, his cunning and guile, that the film was finally finished in 1991.

In 1984, Eric Marano was in his final year at the School of Visual Arts film school in New York City. Like his fellow students, he was making a film for his thesis project, but unlike his peers, he envisioned a movie that would surpass the smaller scope and limited audience that thesis projects usually entail. While other SVA seniors were making films that were short, conservative in method, and had a life that would end at the graduation screening, Eric was determined to make a feature, to shoot it entirely on meticulously constructed sets, and to get the film distributed, either theatrically or on home video. *The Age of Insects* is the result of several ideas that had been bouncing around Eric's head for quite some time. He had been reading Timothy Lear's autobiography, *Flashback*, as well as *Cities of the Red Night* by William S. Burroughs. Both these books had Eric thinking a lot about hallucination. He envisioned a scene in which a group of kids unwittingly ingest hallucinogens. Eric had also imagined a character from the Third World who, at the start of the movie, would be timid and submissive, but would eventually rise up and triumph. A third theme with which Eric was preoccupied was the idea that parents would go to astounding lengths to control their children. One of these concepts came to the basic plot of the movie. The parents of a juvenile delinquent hire a mad doctor and his Indian assistant to transform their son using hallucinogenic drugs and occult practices. The experiment goes awry, leaving the doctor despondent and the once submissive assistant dominating the world.

Eric brought this plot outline, along with pages of notes about the characters, to screenwriter Andy Rees. Eric had met Andy through a mutual friend, and after seeing a production of Andy's play *Ghosts*, (a bizarre adaptation of Ibsen's original), and being very impressed by the play's dialogue, Eric decided that Andy would be the perfect person to put words in the mouths of the characters that he had envisioned. With Andy's help, Eric's ideas developed into a full blown script, and the characters of *The Age of Insects* were born: Dr. Richard Benedict, the greedy, insect-obsessed maniacal scientist; the doctor's assistant Sehra, the gentle supplicant whose humble facade hides murderous ambition; and the Rhodes family, who gives new meaning to the word dysfunctional -- wayward son Lance, father Jack, and Beverly, the spoiled, decadent mother.

As the story was being developed, Eric began construction on the sets that would form the background for every scene. As an SVA student, Eric had access to a filmstage. He knew that this gave him a unique opportunity, one that was especially rare for New York City, and he was eager to take advantage of the situation. Building his own set allowed Eric to establish visual motifs that enhanced the atmosphere that Eric wanted to create. He still maintains the importance of creating a rich visual backdrop for any narrative. His philosophy is that the sets and set dressing should be designed to create an atmosphere that influences the way the actors portray their characters. For *The Age of Insects*, he enlisted the help of storyboard artist and art director Matt Karol. The basic set consisted of three rooms, which when viewed from above, formed a triangle, an important occult symbol. Each room was connected by a two-way mirror, thus emphasizing the theme of voyeurism, and creating a voyeuristic aura on the set, the effect of which can be observed in the actor's performances.

Once the sets were on their way to completion and the first draft of the script was created, Eric began the process of casting by putting an advertisement in *Backstage*, New York's theater weekly. He was swamped. This was during the mid-1980's,

when the city was teeming with talented actors. Over twenty five actors showed up to audition for each of the film's nine roles, and from this pool, eight actors were cast, including Lisa Zane, who created the role of Sehra and went on to star in such major Hollywood films as *Nightmare on Elm Street 6*, and is currently a regular on "L.A. Law." The only actor who was not found through *Backstage* was K.C. Townsend, who played Beverly Rhodes. K.C.'s electric career included several starring roles on Broadway, leads in numerous low-budget horror movies, including *Dark Shadows*, and the role of the stripper in Bob Fosse's *All That Jazz*. She had worked with Andy Rees before, and although Eric saw many other actors for that part, with her vitriolic line delivery, K.C. won the role.



Shooting began in March of 1984. Eric had always planned to shoot the film in super 8. He had bought a camera, a Beaulieu 5008, used, in 1983. He rhapsodizes about the camera and about the money he saved using super 8. "I've owned that camera for ten years, without one day of problems." By owning his own camera, he was able to save thousands of dollars in rental fees, and the low cost of Super 8 stock saved him a bundle over what he would have paid had he used 16mm. "16mm snowballs the cost," he maintains, "At today's prices, 2 minutes of 16mm will cost you \$40.00, and that doesn't include a workprint. With Super 8, you can shoot 2 minutes, process it, and be ready to work, for half the price. Today, hindsight has given Eric a few reservations about super 8. Distributors will dismiss a film before seeing it if they hear that it was shot on Super 8, and although Eric used every kind of Super 8 film that existed, he found the range rather limited. He still believes that Super 8 has merit, and points to its grainy texture and frequent use in music videos and commercials.

Eric's directorial style was to have the actors play it straight, letting the humour come from the words. He always rehearsed his actors extensively before the first take. He still works this way, considering it a must for all filmmakers, especially those on a tight budget. "It is important for the cast and the crew to rehearse before shooting, especially for special effects. It's crazy not to do it, because it saves money and increases quality at the same time." He points to the discoveries that can be made during rehearsal, elements of the actors' delivery that can

can change the way a scene is filmed.

Although his budget was very tight, Eric did not let his monetary concerns cramp his vision. "I am committed to making interesting, visual film, not just cheezy, low-budget movies." He emphasizes the importance of going to tremendous lengths to make each shot compelling. He was very inventive in finding ways to get the shots he wanted without spending too much money. At one point, he and DP Ignacio Valero hired a tourist helicopter for \$40 in order to capture an aerial view of Manhattan. Another scene, a night sequence in New York's Times Square was shot from the 38th floor of an office building. Ignacio was in the building and Eric was on the ground calling the shots via telephone.

Principal photography wrapped in late march, and then Eric travelled to Cambridge, MA to transfer the footage to video. He had always planned to edit in video - it was cheaper, faster, and more sophisticated than editing on film. "After being a professional editor for nine years, I've come to believe that film editing is archaic," he argues, "Video editing allows you to preview, is much faster and easier, and without too much trouble, you can conform a video edit to film. Today we have nonlinear computer editing, which will be even better." He did the film transfer with Bob Brodsky and Toni Treadway, the "Super 8 Saints" of America. The husband and wife team has been working with Super 8 film for many years, and have been actively fighting for its survival, petitioning Kodak to continue to produce it. Bob Brodsky is a former minister and a brilliant colorist, and Toni Treadway is a very knowledgeable businessperson. Together, the couple are extremely helpful and hospitable. They even offered to let Eric spend the night in their home, when a transfer session went on well after dark.

With his footage newly on video, Eric returned to New York. He had been planning to edit the film himself, and when he considered the amount of money that he would spend renting a system on which to edit the film as compared to the amount of money it would cost to purchase such a system, he realized that the difference was minimal. "Hell," he thought, "If I'm going to be spending thousands of dollars to edit this film, I may as well have something when I'm done with it." On Halloween Day in 1984, he bought two Sony 3/4" decks, an RM 440, and two monitors, and late that year, the editing of *The Age of Insects* began. And stopped. After a full year of working exclusively on his project, Eric was broke. In order to devote the time and money needed to finish *The Age of Insects*, Eric had to put it aside for sometime, while he worked as an editor and producer on other people's projects in order to raise the cash to complete the film.

In 1987 Eric hired experimental videomaker Eric Schefter to help him edit the film. Schefter had seen the film and was extremely enthusiastic about it. The last leg of production began in earnest in the spring of 1988, when the two Eric's began to put together an assembly. Eric Marano wrote some additional dialogue with Andy Rees, who was at that time very sick with AIDS. Eric would visit him in his hospital room, where together they penned some of Dr. Benedict's speeches. Andy died six months later.

Additional footage was shot that year, including the final scene with Dr. Benedict, for which Eric and Eric travelled to Indiana to capture Jack Ramey. Amazingly, seven years hadn't aged the actor at all, and any difference between that scene and the previous one is undetectable.

In the summer of 1990, Eric had completed a version of the film, which he took to the VSDA home video convention in Las Vegas. He showed it to dozens of people, representatives of studios and distribution companies ranging from the small to the mammoth, the most obscure and arty to the most mainstream. Every person that Eric spoke to told him that his film was lacking the one thing that would make it salable: tits (to use their word). Years before, Eric might have been more discouraged by this information. But by 1990, after working in the film and video business for six years, it came as no big surprise. To appease the businesspeople who might distribute

the film, Eric inserted a dream sequence in which Sehra, clad in lingerie, disrobes for Lance. Using a body double and video effects designed by Eric Schefter, Eric created one of the more memorable scenes in the film, a scene that accomplishes much more than simply satisfying the crude demand of the distributors. To add time to the film, Eric shot a title sequence with actor Pierre Brulatour ranting and raving as the subject of one of Dr. Benedict's less successful experiments. This scene came out splendidly, starting the film with an aura of mystery and suspense.



The final touches were put on the film in 1991. In May, screenwriter Peter Hall was enlisted to help give clarity to the story. His fresh perspective was very valuable to Eric at that time and following his advice, the focus of the story shifted more towards Dr. Benedict. Peter wrote several speeches for the Doctor which were used as voiceovers throughout the film. In July of 1991, the final scene was shot, in August, September, and October, the film was completed, and finally, on October 17th, *The Age of Insects* was premiered at Anthology Film Archives in Manhattan.

After the film was completed, Eric set out to find a distributor. He mailed screening copies to scores of distributors and press contacts. He was reviewed by *Film Threat Magazine*, *Psychotronic* and *The Independent*. Finally in January, 1992, his patience was rewarded with a distribution contract with Film Threat Distribution.

Eric Marano's advice to independent filmmakers can be distilled into a sentence: "You have to have some money - *Laws of Gravity* and *El Mariachi* are flukes - you must also have patience, and above all, you've got to have guile."

*The Age of Insects* is available for \$29.95 through American Montage, Inc., P.O. Box 1042, Old Chelsea Station, New York, NY 10011. Also available are beautiful, double sided, 100% cotton, *Age of Insects* T-shirts. Only \$20.00