

It's a blistering cold February morning on the Mickley property in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, a farm about an hour and a half outside of New York City and a spot where local residents aren't accustomed to a small crew making a movie right in their own backyard. But here we are, and this writer tries his best to brave the cold by nursing a hot cup of coffee. Despite the bitter weather, one can't help but get giddy at the sight of filmmaker Stevan Mena a mere few paces ahead, directing genre veterans David (An American Werewolf in London) Naughton and Ken (Dawn of the Dead) Foree in the same scene, while the frantic crew prepares the next shot.

Naughton and Foree together in the same movie? That's right—and standing right behind Naughton is comedian Gerry (The 40 Year-Old Virgin) Bednob, while not too far off in the trailers stationed on this location, Ellen (The Evil Dead) Sandweiss and Brian (Clerks) O'Halloran are waiting to shoot scenes scheduled for later in the day. Rumor has it that Gunnar Hansen, the original Leatherface himself, was on location a

few days back, along with Sandweiss' fellow Ladies of The Evil Dead Betsy Baker and Theresa Tilly (a.k.a. Sarah York). How'd all these recognizable scary and funny faces end up in rural Pennsylvania, shooting a horror mockumentary called Brutal Massacre (coming in July on DVD from Anchor Bay Entertainment following select theatrical bookings this spring)?

In 2004, writer/director Stevan Mena had successfully managed to complete his debut slasher flick Malevolence and seen it receive limited theatrical engagements, followed by a DVD release in April 2005 from Anchor Bay—becoming its biggest disc debut ever. During this period, Mena worked closely with the company's Tom Bamard on Malevolence's DVD features, and the two struck up an immediate friendship.

By ROB GALLUZZO

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# BRUTAL MASSACRE

It's tougher, bloodier and funnier than you'd think, according to this horror mockumentary.

Real Brutal Massacre writer/director Stevan Mena had a much better time with his collaborators (left to right: Brian O'Halloran, David Naughton, Ellen Sandweiss and Gunnar Hansen) than the fictitious one does.

Life and death imitate art on the set of the film within the film.



"We thought a lot alike," Bamard recalls. "His directing style and view on horror films matched my sense of them as well. As things moved along, we decided it would be great to work together at some point. A year ago, we sat down and decided to team up and work on producing the remaining films in his Malevolence trilogy."

Rights issues arose shortly before preproduction on the Malevolence prequel which prevented the duo from making that their next film, so Mena opted to move onto another project he'd been vying to do, a ghost story titled Abaddon. That project was rushed into preparation with the hopes of shooting at the Bethlehem Steel Mills before they were torn down to make way for a line of casinos.

"It was, in my opinion, the scariest place on Earth," Mena says. "The problem was, that place wasn't going to be around much longer. So I said, 'Either we shoot now, or we don't shoot at all,' because I felt we couldn't make that movie without that location. It just wouldn't have been the same film for me."

Disappointed when they were unable to secure that site for Abaddon, Mena then rediscovered an old comedy screenplay about the making of a horror film that had frequented his trash bin for the past few years. "Brutal Massacre was a script he had written but didn't really consider a serious project," Bamard reveals. "He had

set it aside because of the other projects he wanted to produce first, but he sent me a copy and I thought it was really funny—a total departure from serious horror films. We started discussing who might be in a film like that and how we would do it. The more we talked about it, the more fun the project sounded."

"Brutal Massacre was originally something we were going to do extremely low-budget, shot on video, completely on a lark, as a joke," Mena says. "We started sending the script around to genre stars, and everybody loved it. The response was euphoric. I thought, 'Wouldn't it be cool to do something completely different from what anyone would expect from me?'"

"We started making phone calls, other people read the script and really liked it, so everything just fell into place," Bamard continues. "We were able to get it together very quickly." Since the team had already scouted Bethlehem for the potential Abaddon shoot, it was a no-brainer to use many of those locations for the new project.

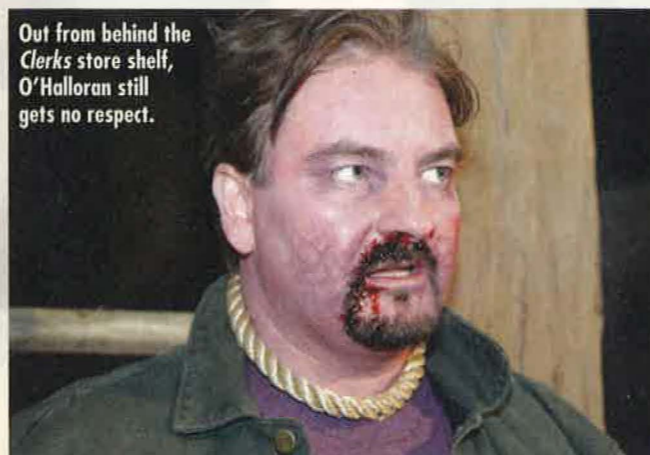
Brutal Massacre is set up as a mockumentary in which reporter Bert (Vincent Butta) chronicles the making of director Harry Penderecki's big comeback movie of the same title. Penderecki (played by Naughton) saw moderate success in the '80s with a slew of genre titles, which included Sasquatch at the Mall, People Pesticide and I'll Take the Ring Back and the Finger Too. After a few unforeseeable mishaps on those previous films and a long break from the genre, he's ready to reassemble his eccentric crew and shoot what is sure to be his horror masterpiece. Or so he thinks.

"He's not necessarily a bad guy," Naughton says. "There has to be some kind of likability for this character. So rather than just be this crazy wacko who doesn't care about people, I believe he's just very passionate about what he does! This is a guy who's a seasoned director; it looks like he's had successes in his past, but like anybody who's had any kind of career, over time there were some ups and downs, and the making of Brutal Massacre is the opportunity to infuse new energy and hopefully be a success for him, because he really needs one."

Bamard couldn't be more pleased with Naughton's portrayal of Penderecki. "He has a great, dry sense of comedic timing," the producer says. "After the first day of shooting, we couldn't imagine having anyone else in that role." Adds Naughton, "Stevan just wanted it real and believable."

What was it like for Mena, a self-proclaimed huge fan of the genre, to suddenly be at the helm of a movie with a Who's Who list

Out from behind the Clerks store shelf, O'Halloran still gets no respect.



Photos: K Studios/Copyright Anchor Bay

of genre actors? "It's a situation that could be intimidating with those types of people," he admits, "but everybody was super-friendly and super-cooperative, and they were all team players. There have been no egos on the set whatsoever. It's seriously the nicest group I've ever met."

Many of these players have, at one time or another, shared space alongside each other at convention halls, but this was a unique opportunity for a number of them to finally collaborate on a feature. "I'd seen both Ken and Gunnar at horror con appearances," Naughton says. "We hadn't worked together before, though, so it was fun to watch Gunnar be able to do comedy, which came as such a surprise to everyone. It didn't surprise me that he could do it so well, though, because he's a smart guy, very knowledgeable and just a warm individual, which really lends itself to comedy. Ken is a great guy, too. There was no doubt in my mind in terms of their ability to act."

Mena's relationship with Hansen actually goes all the way back to the first public screening of *Malevolence* in Worcester, MA in 2004, and the two have remained friends ever since. "Gunnar genuinely loved the film, and came down to meet me at the screening and to promote the movie! He ended up coming to a number of the premieres, like the ones in New York and California; he really helped me promote *Malevolence*. We stayed in touch, and I told him the next time I made a movie, he'd definitely be in it; I didn't care what it was, but I was going to give him a role. So when this came along, I knew he'd be perfect for the part of Fetkovich. Who knew that Gunnar was going to hit a home run and be this funny?"

In the film, Fetkovich is a foul-mouthed, drunken Vietnam vet who allows Penderecki's crew to use his house as the residence of *Brutal Massacre's* killer. From the response at early festival screenings, it's becoming

O'Halloran in his trailer along with the film's FX crew from Toe Tag Pictures, hard at work on the actor's face.

"There's a prop body that comes out terrible in the movie within the movie, so they make Jay take its place," O'Halloran divulges about the reason he's getting dabbed with splotches of red makeup. "I first met Stevan at the Long Island Film Festival a couple of years ago, and we exchanged information and kept in touch. He sent the script over, I read it and really liked it and we got going on it right away. What I really enjoyed was that the comedy aspect was very

Harv (Gerry Bednob) must really be crazy if he thinks he can take Carl (Ken Foree).



Harry Penderecki (Naughton) wonders when he'll get his shot at a *Masters of Horror* episode.



clear that Hansen steals the show.

In addition to its well-known genre names, *Brutal Massacre* makes plenty of room for well-established comedic performers as well—such as Bednob, who plays Hanu, Penderecki's DP and right-hand man. "The Hanu character, as originally written, didn't have too many lines," Mena admits. "But Gerry read it and loved it, so I knew I had to rewrite the script, because he's just too funny to not give him a bunch of one-liners."

Naughton also has plenty of praise for his co-star, who has kept him entertained throughout the shoot. "Gerry is just visually funny," he says, "and for him to be cast as a director of photography was hysterical. He was just a joy to be around."

They'd ask me, 'Do you need Gerry here for your off-camera work?' And I'd say, 'No! I need him here for off-camera jokes!' He must have told me every joke he's ever heard."

Mena adds, "I thought, 'Wouldn't it be funny if he mimics Harry?'" and Naughton continues, "Right off the bat in the first week, his thing would be to copy everything Harry does—his gestures, and even his phrases. We had a scene where I say, 'What does this mean?' and he comes bopping along screaming, 'What mean?' And that became a catchphrase for the rest of the shoot!"

O'Halloran, best known for his portrayal of Dante Hicks in Kevin Smith's *Clerks* movies, takes the role of dutiful assistant director Jay. While Mena, Naughton and Foree continue shooting a scene in the barn out back, Fango joins



The Toe Tag Pictures FX team got to contribute more to this movie than just a *Massacre*.

strong. It was very funny that it tackled the horror genre and made it into a mockumentary."

As mentioned earlier, Naughton is no stranger to the convention scene, and it's represented in *Brutal Massacre's* opening sequence, in which Penderecki sits in on a panel with writer/director Mick Garris at a fictitious FANGORIA *Weekend of Horrors* con. "It was so authentic. They nailed it," Naughton says, and Mena adds, "As far as the authenticity of the Fango show, Tom gets full credit for that." Bambard had plenty of experience helping organize panels at previous Fango cons, so once he read the script, he never doubted that he would recreate one in the movie, even inviting Fango editor Tony

**"It was fun to watch Gunnar [Hansen] be able to do comedy, which came as such a surprise to everyone."**  
—David Naughton, actor

Timpone to cameo as himself and introduce Penderecki's discussion. Garris' presence on set was a pleasant surprise to all involved, including Naughton. "It was funny to have Mick there," the actor says, "because it lends some authenticity to the fact that Harry's a real director."

Bambard helped convince Garris to take part in *Brutal Massacre*, although it didn't take a lot of effort considering Garris' appreciation for Mena's work. "I'd known Mick for a while," Bambard says, "most notably from working on the *Masters of Horror* DVDs. I always found Mick to be a wonderfully warm, genuine, enthusiastic filmmaker who really supports efforts like this. To do an independent film and to assist someone like Stevan in achieving his goal, he was absolutely thrilled to come out and see what we were doing, as well as help out and do the cameo. He was very supportive."

A big fan of Garris, Mena can't help but gush over the filmmaker's appearance in his movie. "Of all the famous people I've met," he says, "he's high in my top 10! He opened up to me in so many ways by telling me all these crazy stories about shooting *The Stand*. I just wanted to handcuff myself to the guy so I could talk to him for a week!"

"Mick was very much a team player," Naughton adds. "He came in from the West Coast; it wasn't like he happened to be in the neighborhood of Bethlehem. He made an effort to do it, and it really did make the show."

So what is it about Bethlehem that attracts Mena back here to shoot all his films? "Just the friendliness," he explains. "It's not an inconvenience for the local people, it's an

excitement. They're thrilled that a film is being shot here, and they'll bend over backwards to help you! Whereas in a place where they shoot movies all the time, you're always asked if you have a permit. In Bethlehem and Allentown, people think, 'Wow, they're shooting a movie here? This is great! What can I do to help? How can I be involved?'"

Bambard adds, "We also find that this part of Pennsylvania is very versatile in terms of scenery, and even though they don't shoot many films here, there are a number of diverse locations in a very contained area."

"You have locations that you would never see in a movie," Naughton adds. "It's not like you're up in Vancouver, where they make 100 movies a year and they're running out of original-looking places. People are very interested and cooperative when it comes to being available for getting locations. We literally got some people off the street when we needed them."

"One of the extras for the convention scene owned a pizza place," Mena recalls. "He brought food for everybody at lunch that day! He showed up with free pizzas, a stack of 50 pies, just because we put him in the movie. *That's* Bethlehem, Pennsylvania! I'm sure there are plenty of places like this, but this one's mine. I found my little hidden place, which for me is my comfort zone."

Several weeks after the completion of principal photography on *Brutal Massacre*, Fango checks in with the film's stars to ask what they took away from collaborating with Mena on a production that came together as fast as this one did. "To Steve's credit, he's got it in terms of how to be patient and elicit performances from people," Naughton says. "And that will be something he'll be able to draw from for the rest of his career."

O'Halloran agrees: "What's great about Stevan is that he's extremely one-on-one and personable with everybody he works with. There was never an issue; there was never a question you couldn't ask him, and there weren't any suggestions he wouldn't take into consideration, or at least give you the opportunity to voice."

What's next for Mena and Bambard? "We're eventually going to do *Abaddon*, but the *Malevolence* prequel is next," Mena says; that film recently wrapped, with Michael (*Aliens*) Biehn and John (*Carnivàle*) Savage among the cast. "It's definitely a much bigger movie than the first one. We're hoping for a wide theatrical release, because this film will stand on its own. The title is *Malevolence: Bereavement*, and it's very dark—so much so that I really needed to shoot something a little lighter before tackling it. That's why I directed a comedy [*Brutal Massacre*] first."



Reporter Bert (Vincent Butta) wants to get really close to this story (Michelle DiBenedetti).