

THE HOUSE OF THE DEVIL

Enter If You Dare!

By ROBERT GALLUZZO



Tag along with an innocent college girl as she picks the wrong place to take a babysitting job.

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62


While driving down the back roads of Limerock, Connecticut, this Fango writer can't help but wonder: Could this long stretch of dirt road in this remote suburban area really lead to the shooting location of filmmaker Ti West's latest feature *The House of the Devil*?

With the sun still setting in the background, I pull up to an ominous-enough-looking domicile covered with giant rigs and production lights, signifying that this must indeed be where they're shooting the movie (a Glass Eye Pix/MPI co-production set for limited theatrical release October 30 from Magnolia Pic-

tures' Magnet Releasing arm). Sure enough, actor A.J. Bowen greets me at the front door, anxious and eager to talk about the film and show me around the location, which has been carefully crafted to match the film's early-'80s setting.

"Welcome to *The House of the Devil*," he announces. Bowen is no stranger to Fango or horror in general: A self-professed genre fan, he appeared in the 2007 Sundance hit *The Signal*, as well as (ahem) *Creepshow 3* and the yet-to-be-released black-and-white indie chiller *Maidenhead* alongside Michael Parks. He acts as my tour guide throughout the duration of my evening on set and

leads me around the house, pointing out the meticulous detail in every single room meant to evoke the film's time period. Old rotary phones in the kitchen. *Masters of the Universe* action figures and Garbage Pail Kids in the children's room upstairs. And then there's the basement, cold and barren with a giant pentagram scrawled across the floor, surrounded by several ceremonial candles. It looks like something serious is going to go down here later tonight!



"The satanic worship angle was one I hadn't seen done well, ever—or for at least a long time."
—Ti West, writer/director

"Ti and I had a lot of conversations about the 'satanic panic' of the early '80s," Bowen explains. "People always thought there was a satanic church in every town that they just knew existed. This film plays with that idea, with the fantasy of, what if it were not merely a town legend, not just a old wives' tale? In that respect, they don't make 'em like they used to. Ti's movie is a creepy and atmospheric, methodical little story about an unfortunate babysitter, played by Jocelin Donahue, who just happens to enter the home of a satanic cult. It's an honest mistake—as is the case in most horror movies."

At this point, we head over to the FX room where Quantum Creation FX, whose credits include *Splinter*, is crafting *The House of the Devil*'s various gags. Special makeup wiz Ozzy Alvarez is hard at work prepping the appliance that fellow artist Danielle Noe will be wearing for the evening's scenes. She's taking a night off from her regularly scheduled duties to portray "Mother," the mysterious figure who hides out in the attic, and who Samantha

(Donahue's character) is coaxed into babysitting. The duo explain that they have already established a strong collaborative relationship with West from working on his previously lensed but still unreleased *Cabin Fever 2*, which is how Noe was so easily convinced to endure the uncomfortable prosthetics to portray one of the film's baddies.

"Ti figured, why find someone else to do it when I'm already going to be here, we're friends, he knows I'll do whatever he wants and I'll just wear it and won't complain," Noe says. "I know what I'm in for. Plus, it's going to be much better for the lead actress knowing that it's me underneath the makeup and not some stranger, because it's a pretty intense scene."

While this interview is underway, Bowen can't help but pull out his iPod and start playing "Almost Paradise" by Mike Reno and Ann Wilson—yes, the song from *Footloose*. Both artists sigh and Alvarez discloses, "He's been doing this the whole shoot." Bowen then explains his particular Method, which involves creating a music mix for his character on each film. It helps him figure out who he's playing if he's able to build a soundtrack for his role, which in this case is the menacing Victor, the son of Mr. and Mrs. Ulman (played by Tom Noonan and Mary Woronov).

While Noe begins filming the first appearance of "Mother" in the attic, Bowen continues our chat in one of the house's many vacant rooms. The actor is cryptic regarding exactly what role Victor plays in the proceedings, revealing only, "I would say that Victor is very committed and gratefully happy to do his job and to be a member of this family."

Fango wonders aloud if Victor shares similar violent tendencies to those of Bowen's Lewis from *The Signal*, to which he replies with a smile, "There are some things he does in this movie that are questionable. But hey, it's all in the name of Satan. So all is well, right?"

He once again pulls out his iPod to give Fango additional samplings of the music he believes Victor enjoys. "Victor listens to a lot of 'the Boss'—plenty of Bruce Springsteen. A little Jackson Browne. My character stalks a babysitter, so he'd of course listen to John Carpenter's *Halloween* soundtrack. I've got 'In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida' on here, but that's because Tom Noonan [who starred in *Manhunter*, in which that tune was a key soundtrack element] is on set. Do you know who Kate Smith is?"



This House's guests go swimming in pools of blood.



Who will Eating Raoul's Mary Woronov prey on this time?

When Fango responds in the negative, he starts playing "Do You Hear What I Hear?," an immediately recognizable classic Christmas song. "Yeah, a little Christmas cheer in a movie about Satan. This is the one that people really laugh about. I guess it's kind of cheesy [making mixes], but there are a number of things I do to try to get into a place of figuring out the guy I'm portraying. Once I figure out the playlist, that's a big part of it."

At this point, Woronov enters the room to join in on the interview and immediately demonstrates her loving offscreen rapport with her onscreen son. Bowen jokes, "I actually brought my copy of *Silent Night, Bloody Night* to get autographed," to which the actress snaps back, "Oh, you know I'm not signing anything for you!"

Once settled, the veteran of such cult favorites as *Death Race 2000* and *Eating Raoul* confesses that she turned down working with West several times before agreeing to be part of *House*. "I get offered these roles all the time," she notes. "And this one was once again 'scary Mary,' which I wasn't interested in. But I finally met with Ti and we spoke for several hours about this, and I said, 'Fine, sure.' He's so into his film that you become enamored of that, and after talking with him, you just want to help him make it."

Whereas Bowen preps for each role with music and more, Woronov's approach is a bit different. "I'm not Method, I'm camp," she admits. "There's a big difference. I don't sit around thinking about being the person; I comment on her. When I arrive on the set, it's a very quick process for me. I do it, and I usually understand what I'm doing very well. But I can't judge a movie beforehand. I'm just not good at that."

When pressed for her thoughts on *The House of the Devil's* storyline, she gives an example of why she prefers to wait to see a completed film. "You know, *Eating Raoul*—I read that script and said, 'This is stupid. It's just a lot of setup so you can have sex scenes in here, and I think it's really creepy.' Then I saw it, and I believe it's the best movie I've ever done. So after that I decided, 'Mary, you shouldn't think about these things so much.'"

At this point, Noonan enters the conversation, and this writer is suddenly excited to be sharing the room with all three key members of *The House of the Devil's* evil family. It has been four days since Noonan arrived on set and he has yet to officially meet Bowen, so I figure it's my duty to introduce them: "Tom? This is A.J. He plays your son in the movie." Deadpan, Noonan replies, "Yeah, yeah, I've seen him around."



Did you expect the *House of the Devil* to be furnished by Pier 1?



Certain scenes involving star Jocelin Donahue will likely have audiences gagging too.

The entire room can't help but laugh, and Fango tries to get Noonan serious enough to explain what the movie is about from his perspective—not entirely successfully. "Well, we live in this house," he says, "and this girl comes over because she wants to babysit, and she's a pain in the ass, so we have to take her down into the basement to stab her. It's really a drag. We were all doing fine until she came along."

After a few more jokes and back-and-forth banter with his cinematic spouse, Noonan finally gets serious and discusses his previous collaboration with West. "I first worked with Ti on *The Roost*," he recalls. "Larry Fessenden, the producer on that [and one on *House* as well], is a friend of mine, and he got me in *The Roost*. We both make movies and we're both from New York. So I met Ti

at Sundance. It was his first film, and I shot my scenes in like 90 minutes. I just drove down to some funhouse that he loved as a kid down across the Shore, and he put me in a tuxedo and we did the wraparound scenes. I remember I went to Larry's house and he showed me some scenes from it, and I thought it was really good considering the budget they had."

His positive experience on *The Roost* convinced Noonan to come back and reteam with West on *The House of the Devil*. "There's a bit of humor in all of Ti's films and they're very personal for him, which is why I find them to be great. There's room to be a person in them with these characters, not just some machine doing all this crazy shit. I get offered a lot of this kind of stuff all the time and I've done a bunch of these things, and most of it's not very interesting. It's different with Ti's movies."

Woronov immediately chimes in, "I think this film is going to be a little different from the usual horror movie. Ti pays a lot of attention to details. He's also very open and collaborative; he doesn't have a script person counting every word he wants."

Noonan continues by explaining how *The House of the Devil* stands regarding his own personal tastes in horror. "I don't really watch the slasher stuff of the last couple of years, like *Saw*. Those kinds of things I don't enjoy, but I love the Japanese horror movies, like *The Grudge* and *The Ring*. Those movies are great. What I like about this one is that it just feels new to me. It doesn't feel like a two-dimensional thing. It's scarier in a

way, even though it's not as graphic as some of the films out there these days. What makes this scary is, you make these characters human and you get to the audience with them and once you've got them, you can scare them."

Noonan, a respected actor in many areas, is often recognized

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If you worship satanic cinema of the '70s, has Ti West (pictured) got a movie for you.

for his several genre contributions. The cult status of one particular film, a flop upon its initial release, surprises him: "*The Monster Squad*. I had no idea people even knew this movie. I did a convention about a year ago where there were 10,000 kids there to see me and all the stars. During the panel, someone asked, 'When did you realize the cult following for this movie?' And I said, 'About 15 minutes ago.'"

It's late into the twilight hours, and Fango watches on a monitor as Bowen, now sporting a long, satanic robe, circles poor Donahue, who's bound in the center of the basement's pentagram and about to potentially fall victim to a bizarre ritual. After several takes, West finally takes a short break to chat as the crew sets up the next shot.

"It's about a girl in college," he begins, "who's a bit financially down on her luck and doesn't really like her situation in the dorm, so she wants to move into her own apartment. She finds a new apartment and is pretty excited but can't afford the initial rent, so in hopes of making some extra money, she takes a babysitting job, which turns out to be at this house with these strange people. She finds out over the course of the evening that they're a cult that has lured her here."

"So it really is very much a split of two things," he continues. "One is, if the urban legend was true, this is as far-fetched as it could ever get. And then the other half of the film is like the early parts of a slasher movie, where it's regular-life stuff. It's about the fears of having to get an apartment and not having enough money and going to a weird house, and being bored there and sneaking through their kitchen drawers, and doing homework and basic real-life stuff that has nothing to do with anything satanic whatsoever. Then outrageous horrors happen, which we lead up to for the majority of the running time."

Fango brings up the conversations Bowen previously referred to regarding his and West's mutual interest in the occult, to which the writer/director clarifies, "I like that stuff, but I'm not a [real-life] occult guy. I'm more a horror guy, so I know as much about that stuff as anyone. But I always wanted to do this Satanist idea, and something that really spooked people. I



Babysitting is more than a dirty job for Samantha (Donahue).

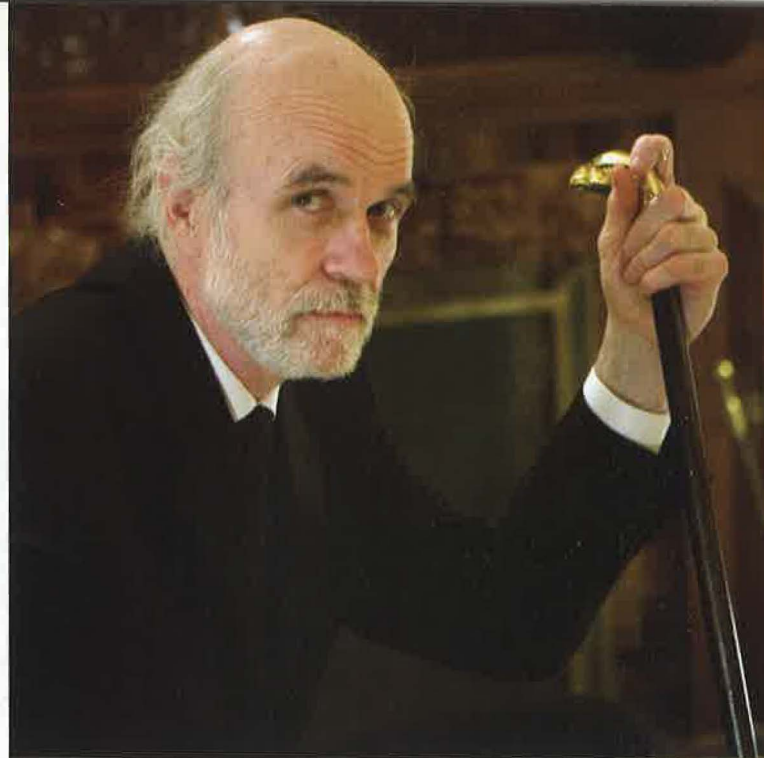
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wanted to make a movie set in the '80s, and have it be about one person, a babysitter, in a secluded location; the satanic [worship] angle was one I hadn't seen done well, ever—or for at least a long time. And I thought, 'Hey, let's do it.' It felt like a part of the genre that's untapped. What happened to the cultists in robes with goat heads and pentagrams? That hasn't been around lately, and really, it has never been around that much, except if you go back to a few old movies."

Shooting *The House of the Devil* has been more of a low-key experience than his last feature gig on *Cabin Fever 2*. "The *Cabin Fever* thing was cool, and I met a lot of really great people—who I got to bring onto this movie. The production designer [Jade Healy, a *Fever* set decorator], the DP [Eliot Rockett] and the effects team...the best thing to come out of *Cabin Fever 2* is the friendships I've formed with a few select people and being able to carry them over here."

The Lionsgate sequel was a high-profile project which no doubt put West under a great deal more scrutiny, but he notes that where pressure is concerned, the situations are pretty similar. "We shot *Cabin Fever* in 22 days, we're shooting this one in 18,



Don't let the gentlemanly demeanor of Mr. Ulman (Tom Noonan) fool you.

and I imagine this movie will look very amber-colored and like an '80s movie. That's what I'm hoping for; it's not a glamorous picture by any means."

With that, the producers summon West back on set to resume shooting the remaining scenes. And with Bowen busy on set, this writer is left to fend for himself inside *The House of the Devil*. Thankfully, the parkway leading back to New York isn't too far from this location...

and it's all in one location for the most part, so it's really not that much different. This is 16mm instead of 35mm, which is a little bit cheaper, and it's better with the house because the camera's smaller."

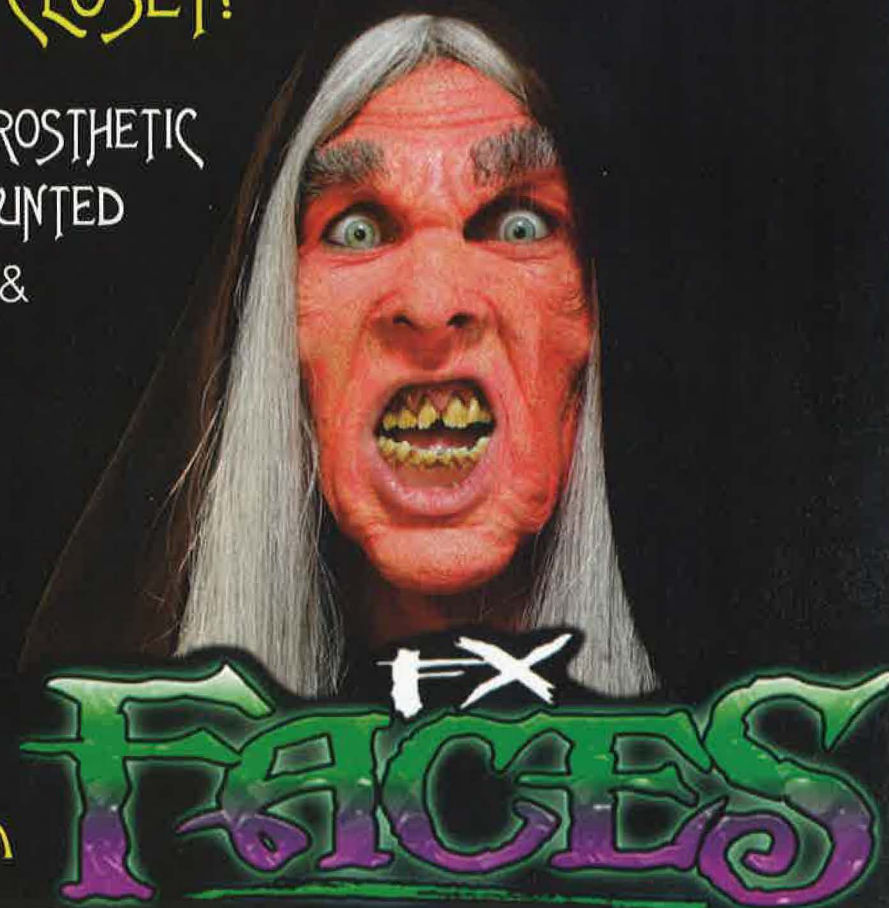
In addition to this practicality, the desire to replicate the look of the 16mm low-budgeters of the decade in which *House* takes place was a key factor in deciding which film format to utilize. "I shot *The Roost* on Super 16, so we thought about doing this in 35, but this house isn't that big," he explains. "We opted for 16 because it involves smaller equipment; if we want to put the camera in the corner, it's way easier on 16. Plus, 16 still has sort of a '70s-'80s film stock veneer. It's a bit grainier and more desaturated,

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