

ALMOST HUMAN

ABDUCTION AND MURDER

Alien kidnapping is just the beginning of the atrocities in an attention-grabbing homegrown shocker.

By **ROB GALLUZZO**

When you look back at the more memorable directorial debuts in the horror genre, the movies that end up standing the test of time are often those put together by a passionate group of longtime friends whose enthusiasm outweighs their low budgets. Sometimes, putting together that first feature requires you to go back to where you started—as was the case with childhood friends Joe Begos and Josh Ethier on *Almost Human*, which opens in limited theatrical release and on VOD February 21 from IFC Films.

The two met fairly early on in high school in Rhode Island, and while Begos had already started making short films on his own, it became a weekly habit once he hooked up with Ethier as a collaborator. "We'd shoot on the weekend and put it all together in a few days," Ethier recalls. "A couple of our other friends showed interest, but no one else really took it seriously."

"One of the first movies we went to see together that struck a chord was *Cabin Fever*," says Begos. "After that, we spent all night talking about ideas for a short inspired by how jazzed we were by that film."

Ethier explains that even very early on, the duo immediately and naturally fell into their respective roles. "When I first met Joe, I was more focused on music, and because of that background, I segued into editing. Joe was always naturally better with a camera and telling a story visually. I was the one who didn't mind getting behind the computer to adjust things frame by frame."

After high school, armed with a bevy of short movies under their collective belts, the pair decided their best bet would be to move to Los Angeles to pursue filmmaking seriously. "If you want to get into movies, it seemed like you had to move to LA," Begos recalls. "Three days after I arrived, I got a job interning for Stuart Gordon." Begos worked on the director's one-man play *Nevermore: An Evening With Edgar Allan Poe* starring Jeffrey Combs, and Gordon followed that up with another unlikely stage show, *Re-Animator: The Musical*. For that production, Begos served as stage manager, which led him to meet his future star-to-be Graham Skipper.

"I started out doing a lot of stage and comedy stuff in New York," says Skipper



of his humble beginnings. "I ended up moving to Los Angeles to do *Re-Animator: The Musical* [in which he played Herbert West], met Joe and we hit it off immediately. I'm a big horror fan and thought I knew everything there was to know about it, but Joe would lend me obscure DVDs of titles I had no idea existed, and continually blow my mind."

At the same time, Ethier was working steadily as an editor on ArieScope Pictures projects like *Holliston*, *Chillerama* and Adam Green's forthcoming *Digging Up the Marrow*. But despite keeping busy in the business, he and Begos knew that putting together their own feature was inevitable. "I just didn't know if it was going to be someone else paying for it, or

"We were all genre fans on set, so Joe could say, 'This is like the scene in *Halloween II*, the tracking shot in the hospital.'"
—Graham Skipper, actor

if it would have to be the Robert Rodriguez/Peter Jackson thing of making it ourselves," Begos admits. "We went to a festival with our *Bad Moon Rising* short, and there were features there that didn't even seem like actual features. We thought, 'We can do this'; that experience really pushed us. *Re-Animator: The Musical* had just ended, I had a little bit of money in the bank and had good credit, so I was able to get a bunch of credit cards and put together enough money so that no matter what, we'd have a feature film in the can by the end of it."

Despite having a handful of scripts ready to shoot, Begos started from scratch

Is it *Almost Human* to be so jazzed about serious gore? (Clockwise from top left: Graham Skipper, Michael A. LaCicero, Josh Ethier, Rob Fitz)



when it came to *Almost Human*, and kept the story simple: In the late '80s, Mark Fisher (Ethier) disappears one night into a flash of bright blue light. Two years later, he resurfaces at the same time a string of grisly murders begins, and his best friend Seth Hampton (Skipper) suspects that something has changed within Mark. It was Begos' goal from the start to mash up a sci-fi saga with an old-school slasher. "Most alien-abduction movies deal with the guy getting taken and coming back years later," Begos notes. "But what if he gets abducted in the opening scene, and then when he comes back, the movie turns into *Maniac*? That's what we were going for."

Considering that Ethier usually played roles both as editor and in front of the camera for all their shorts, it was a given he would portray Mark in *Almost Human*. But they still needed a Seth, and eventually, with mild hesitation, Begos approached Skipper for the role. "It was so funny, because Joe was reluctant to give me the script," the actor remembers. "He said, 'I wrote this thing, but I don't know if you'll be interested in coming out to do it. It'll be in Rhode Island and you'll have to sleep on a couch and it's this alien abduction/splatter movie in the woods.' And I was like, 'What are you talking about? That's exactly what I want to be doing! I'm in.' I thought it was fantastic."

Part of the reason the duo opted to return home to Rhode Island was to establish a specific identity for their movie. "In Los Angeles, you can shoot in someone's apartment or a house in Pasadena, and it all starts to look the same," Begos says.

"If you want to make the location a character, you shoot in a dilapidated house in the woods, and that gives it so much more texture. When you watch a Stephen King movie, it's obvious that the location is a big part of it. I knew we'd find what we needed and get great, authentic production value back in Rhode Island."

"I was hanging out with one of my buddies, Jimmy Curtis, before shooting," Begos continues, "and he said, 'Man, I wish there was something I could do to help you.' And I realized, 'You have a barn, don't you?' I looked at his barn, and it was perfect. I told him that if he could convince his family to let me shoot there, I'd make him a producer on the movie. Twenty-four hours later, we had the go-ahead to shoot in his house, and we had our main location."

"His dad helped us build reinforcements for the door so that when we axed it down, we wouldn't break the frame," adds Ethier. "They fed the crew, and were just a tremendous help."

With locations set and the majority of the cast in place, there was one major role still vacant—that of Jen Craven, the fiancée of the missing Mark. "We were six days away from shooting and still didn't have anyone for Jen," Begos says. "Vanessa Leigh came in at the last minute, and was the best actress we saw."

"She was great, because she was also into horror," adds Skipper. "We were all genre fans on set, so Joe could say, 'This is like the scene in *Halloween II*, the tracking shot in the hospital,' and we'd all be like, 'Oh, cool! I know exactly what you mean.' We all spoke that language, and it



In his current state, Mark (Ethier) wouldn't seem to need any encouragement to pick up a chainsaw.

made the process fun." When you're creating a splatterfest, it's important to find the right special FX artist to step up to the task. Rather than bring someone in from LA, Begos and crew looked to talent in the New England area. They found Rob Fitz, who had helmed his own genre feature *God of Vampires* and has had extensive makeup experience on major motion pictures lensed in the region, including *Grown Ups* and *American Hustle*. "I built the setpieces around the story, because I knew essentially what they were going to be," Begos explains. "Then we'd decide the best way to go about it. It was almost a greatest-hits thing, because I'd take



Fitz's FX ensure that by the end of the film, some of the characters are barely recognizable as *Human*.



Faced with an altered friend, Seth (Skipper) is ready to rock.



In a New England-set shocker, it's only natural for Jen (Vanessa Leigh) to make like Lizzie Borden.

kills I'd done in old shorts and go in a different direction with them." Adds Ethier, "Because of our experiences on those



As the alien infiltration continues, Jeremy Furtado isn't himself any more.

shorts, we were able to pull off gags we'd done before, only better."

One of the fun moments that's a rarity in alien-abduction flicks is the main character toting a chainsaw—a suggestion that, it should come as no surprise, was made by one of the masters of horror. "That was never supposed to happen," Begos says. "It was three days before we shot a scene where he grabs an ax and chases the girl down, but I believe it was Stuart [Gordon] who read the script and said, 'My one note is that he kills the guy who has a chainsaw, and then the chainsaw sits there. What kind of horror movie is it where you let the chainsaw sit there?' And we

thought, 'You know, he's right. Maybe he should pick it up!'"

But when it comes to favorite FX gags, Begos cites one in particular that almost didn't work on the day. "There's a scene where a head gets crushed with a rock that I didn't think was going to come out right," he says. "That whole day, everything went wrong. We found a way to make it work in postproduction that I learned from the behind-the-scenes featurette on *The Signal*. Now it's the one effect everyone loves."

"Every time we show it to an audience," Ethier says, "there's always a collective gasp and inhale, so it's good to know it works."

Skipper has a different favorite: "Shooting the opening scene with the abduction, because they set up practical lights to pull it off, and it was incredible to see all these people coming together to build this effect—something you could probably easily do with CGI by making everything blue or whatever. But the whole point of this was to actually do it on set. It was a frantic night of shooting, but you can totally tell the difference, because it looks so good."

Begos laughs about one particular occasion when he didn't fully tell Skipper what he'd be seeing once the cameras rolled. "It was a closed set, a big effects scene with nudity, and Graham couldn't be on set as we put it all together, so he was in the car sleeping. He had no idea what was going on."

"I wasn't being lazy," Skipper inter-

jects. "It was a very small room and this was coming off of a 16-hour day, so I went to take a nap. I was in a car in the parking lot trying to stay warm, and someone knocked on the door and said, 'Graham, you're up!' I already had my blood on; I was made up eight hours before. They put a gun in my hand, and Joe was like, 'All right. You're going to come in and I'm just going to shoot your reaction.' When you see the movie, you'll see what I see, and

"What if a guy gets abducted [by aliens] in the opening scene, and then when he comes back, the movie turns into *Maniac*?"
—Joe Begos, writer/director

it's awful. It's horrendous. It's my actual reaction, 100 percent natural." "And it always gets a huge laugh," Ethier finishes.

Once the film was wrapped and Ethier tackled the editing, Begos put his focus on one of the most important aspects of getting the movie noticed: its promotional art. "It was important to me to have a good poster," he says. "The first person we looked up was Tom Hodge [a.k.a. The Dude Designs], who did the posters for Ti West's *The Innkeepers* and *The Sacrament*. Literally the first thing he said was, 'I charge the same rate for everything, no matter if it's a \$2-million movie or a \$20,000 movie.' And it was super-affordable, so we went with him. The whole idea of getting a painted poster was that we had no stars, we had nothing going for us on our debut feature, but we needed to capture people's interest. You look back to video-box covers of the '80s, and those made us all want to watch those movies, so that's what we were aiming for."

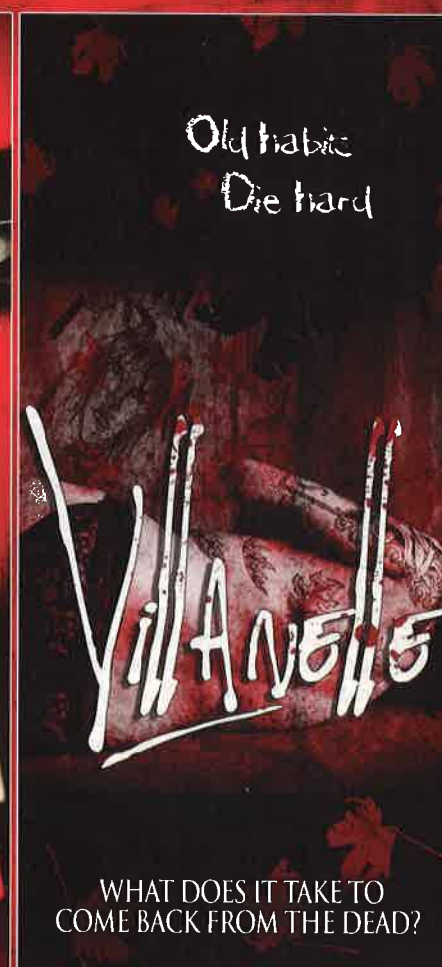
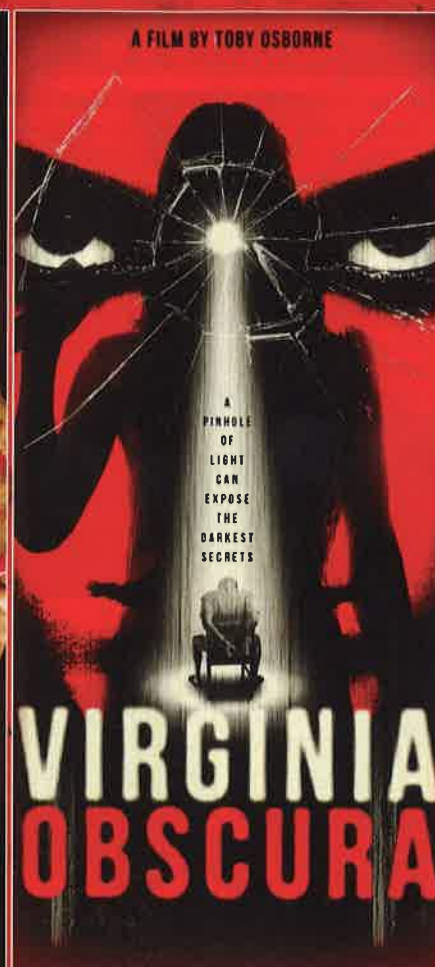
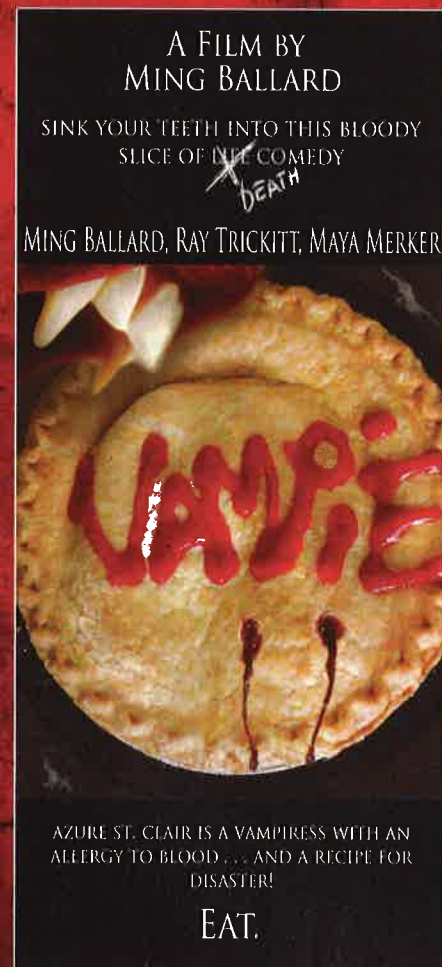
"That was one of the best decisions we made, for a number of reasons," he continues. "First, Colin Geddes at the Toronto International Film Festival had seen the poster three days prior to getting our screener, and thought, 'I have to see this movie!' When we got a foreign/domestic sales agent, usually they're the ones who commission the marketing materials and they charge you a shitload of money for it. We cut our own trailer and had our own poster; they charge \$75,000 to make those things, and I paid \$2,500 for the poster, so we saved \$72,500. Also, by doing that in advance, you're in control of how people perceive your movie."

"What gets me most excited as a horror fan are things like the first poster and the trailer," Begos concludes. "That's what makes me want to check out something I've never heard of. I approached it as, what would drive me to want to see this \$50,000 horror movie? And the poster was it."



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