

Beauty is Only Skinned Deep

Amanda By Night Interviews Filmmaker **Gabe Bartalos**



You may not recognize the name **Gabe Bartalos**, but anyone who loves horror movies is familiar with his deranged creations. He's the special effects mastermind behind such enduring cult classics as **Frankenhooker**, **Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2** and the **Leprechaun** series. It's safe to say that you might not always remember the movie, but you'll never forget the monsters. His filmography reads like a who's who in the world of independent filmmaking. He can boast a close working relationship with everyone from cult horror director **Frank Henenlotter** to **Cremaster** maker **Matthew Barney**. So it was no surprise that when Gabe decided to assault the horror movie world with his own film, **Skinned Deep** was born.

I got a chance to attend a screening at the Harmony Gold Theater in Los Angeles back in the fall of 2003. Being the jaded horror fan I am, I wasn't expecting what turned out to be one of the most original horror films to come along in a post-**Scream** society. Even Gabe admits the story walks a familiar line - a family on a road trip runs afoul of a group of mutants. Sound familiar? Then take a second look. **Skinned Deep** is not your everyday slasher flick. In fact, it's not your everyday anything! Gabe takes a tired plot and turns it on its ear while bombarding the audience with a group of monsters like no other. It's a non-stop roller coaster ride of elderly bikers and headless musclemen! I had the pleasure of sitting down



with Mr. Bartalos to talk about his auspicious debut and it was no surprise that he would turn out to be every bit as likeable and unique as one of his creations. He let me gush, uh, ask him a few questions about Skinned Deep.

Unitshifter: Was the screening I attended the first time you've shown it to an audience?

Gabe Bartalos: No. We actually screened it earlier in New York at the Guggenheim museum. That was cool.

U: Wow, the **Guggenheim!** Did they get it?

GB: They did. Matthew Barney was having a retrospective. An incredible one man show celebrating the completion of his Cremaster cycle. He and the Guggenheim staff, in a really awesome gesture, said they'd show my film when it was finished. I didn't think much of it and didn't press the point at all. But they brought it up again.

U: The streaking scene looks like it was shot in New York...

GB: Dead center Times Square.

U: Did you have to get a permit for that?



GB: No. The whole reason it was done was so other filmmakers can go 'Cool. That wasn't permitted, that wasn't insured. That's not digital. That's a naked guy running through Times Square with a brain on his head!'

U: Was it difficult to get **Jay Dugre** to do that?

GB: Jay was great. He's the new King of the world! Sweet face, nice guy and I knew he'd put up with the long shoot. I told him there was scene that will make or break you. There will be a scene where **Brain** is reminiscing about being normal and I want to him run through the busiest time and the busiest place in the world. Times Square, Friday at 5 o'clock. It took about two years to get to that scene. We got everything

lined up and then he got real quiet! He kept thinking he was almost done with the movie; he won't have to do it. He did get arrested. They saw him and couldn't believe their eyes.

U: What did the cops think of the giant brain?

GB: I think they thought he was some nut who likes to make himself up and streak!

U: Was Brain's prosthetic heavy?

GB: It's heavy. It's a massive thing but it had a hollow core inside. Jay was totally cool. If there was discomfort, we never knew it. He was that good a trooper. The police let him off with no charges. I told them it was a prank. They didn't even know we were filming.

U: **Warwick Davis** (**Return of the Jedi**, **Willow**, **Leprechaun**) plays **Plates**. How was he on the set?

GB: There were a lot of non-professionals in the movie and you just sort of go with it. And Warwick comes on set and you go 'Holy Shit! This guy is good!' Suddenly I see why **George Lucas** likes this guy. He makes everything so easy. You realize that's where stars, who aren't dicks, are worth it because they make your life easy.

U: He has a really great monologue at the end...

GB: Where he's waving the plates and talking about the beauty of porcelain and how it parallels society. Not everyone can get away with that! I might think it's funny while I'm writing it, but if he doesn't deliver it right...



U: Actually, no one except the heroine, **Tina (Karoline Brandt)**, is very normal.

GB: While I was making it and people would ask me about it, I happily give the canned one line 'It's about a girl whose family is slaughtered and she's trapped in a hell house and we watch the atrocities.' I watch their faces drop as their thinking 'Oh, like every other horror movie.' Yeah, but go ahead and see it. It has a linear path that's basically **Texas Chainsaw Massacre**, but my signature is where I go within that.

U: Did you create the biker gang because you got **Forrest J. Ackerman**?

GB: No. You can tell the age of a filmmaker by his cast. It's always these thirty-somethings, which is fine but to me there isn't enough life experience to buy it, even at their best. So I thought I'd do a movie mainly with mutation and seniors!!! I thought it would be funny to make them a motorcycle gang. And then I came up with the **Ancient Ones**. We were almost done shooting that sequence and a friend called and he had a buddy who could do a cameo. It was Forrest J. Ackerman. We were doing the death scenes. We put a leather jacket on

him. Everyone's heads explode in that scene but we hadn't prepped him for that so we gave him a heart attack.

U: Was he easy to work with?

GB: He was great. He thought it was funny and I think he knew we were totally charmed to have him there.

U: Where did you shoot the biker gang scenes?

GB: The Cactus Coral. That's actually here in Sylmar. One day I was driving around on a Sunday and there were these really nice people who sell cactus to the public! They have a great, quirky sense of style. It's funny because that place and the sets looked exactly the same!

U: The house was amazing. The tunnel was crazy.

GB: Which is the stairs (Gabe points towards his studio). I built the bone room underneath the stairs. A stunt lady went to the top of the stairs and with a fish eyed lens we shot her at three different angles three different times. Edited together, it looks twice as long. Most of the sets were right here. Some were more ambitious than others. It was our home turf. It was great.

U: You'd never know it all took place here.

GB: We did a good job of disguising it.

U: Your film is so intricate with the details...

GB: That's what time gave me. No one would let me sit there with 7,000 keys and five friends threading them.

U: The whole film seems to be a comment on life in Hollywood.

GB: Bonus points right there. It's not just weird for weird's sake.



U: The **Surgeon General** was very scary. Where did you come up with him?

GB: I guess I wanted him to be the most unapologetic of the group. At a glance, you wouldn't need any history. You just knew he was a bad person. You should be getting soul from the eyes but your not... I decided to show the cable and the gears. It's like an assembly line. And in a very subliminal way, in a dark room, if you closed your eyes with the right lighting, it's a skull. The negative orbs, the cone and the teeth. It's like those Victorian drawings of two ladies at a table.

When you look back, it's a skull.

U: And what about Brain?

GB: His look was just pure humor. Wouldn't it be hilarious to have a guy with a three foot exposed brain?!? And that's where Jay nailed it. I said for this to work, we have to be so serious. You have to play this like you're in **Gone with the Wind**. And he did!

U: What was up with his Indian feathers?

GB: The gag was that he's trying to win Tina's heart. In the beginning, he has all these disguises. When we first meet him, it's a giant burlap sack. When he goes into battle, it's the suit of armor he's welded. That sums up Skinned Deep. It took months to build and it was used in two shots. But it's so funny!

U: What was the budget?

GB: At this point let me keep it off the radar. But it was probably staggeringly low for what Hollywood budgets are compared to. It was all worth it, but sometimes I wish there was studio support. It was just a lot harder doing it on your own. The purity of doing it independently is that people were only there if they wanted to be. The vibe was so good, it bled out. People would actually come and donate time.

U: How did you schedule the shoot?

GB: I set aside time. We shot in waves which were 9 days to 2 weeks long. It was very **Little Rascals**.

U: Is this your first screenplay?

GB: I've written a couple of other screenplays. One was called "Pool of Darkness" in 95. I shot a short film to go with it. Just like Skinned Deep, it was whacked. Everyone was mortified by it. After a couple of years I just started itching to film again. No one would have made this movie... I said screw it, ya'know, I'd rather have my own say in it. It will take longer and be more expensive, but screw it!

U: At the screening I heard you say Skinned Deep took three years to make...

GB: Actually five years by the time it was all done with the post production and the sound. The sound was huge. I mean, I ended up doing it hands on alone. That took nine months. It's still modest at best. There's no easy way to make a feature.

U: Was it hard to keep Karoline's look consistent?

GB: Not really. Though she's growing fast, she has this stripped down beauty and accessibility that remained the same. Poor Karoline, she'd always be brushing her hair and coming in looking really pretty and there would be her clothes just steaming! We'd spritz her down, which left a grit that looks more real. With pretty people it comes through, regardless. She looks nice, but it's more real.

U: How did you find her?



GB: She responded to an ad we had in the trades. She was really good. She didn't like her test, but she was already being narrowed down. She called back and wanted to do another one...

U: Karoline has the most insane screaming scene. Did you plan on the ear-piercing credits from the beginning?

GB: Probably about half way through... I thought wouldn't it be great to have her screaming all the way through the end credits. We did it in three different sessions then lassoed them all together. It's brutal.



U: Do you enjoy directing?

GB: The directing was easy! It was the producing that was hard. Getting everyone there at the same time when you don't have a lot of financial resources...you can only push so far if you don't have the almighty bucks. The buddy system was huge. And the credit list has some heavy hitters, some of the best in their profession. We shot in waves. The first wave was the least confident. I kept seeing what I was missing so in the next shoot I'd fill it in. By the end it was as if I'd shot three different features. I was so confident. It was a rush. It's a shame when you do an effects film and it's just the same old stuff. You do your stuff the best you can but I'd rather be involved in groundbreaking or kick-ass films!

U: Was the dark humor hard to access?

GB: There's such a fine line but it makes it good. I'd rather have people watch the screen than turn away. They'll miss your gag. I tried to make Skinned Deep not soaked in blood. It's there when it's gotta be, but I'd rather do the weird creatures and sets. How do you cut a kid in half without having people look away? You do it as a cartoon! There was no squirting blood and you laugh.

U: I've noticed that Frank Henenlotter's first film, which he made without you, is completely different than the ones you did with him. How much influence do you think you've had on things like his sense of humor?

GB: I remember on **Basket Case 2**, Frank was like 'You build it, we shoot it!' It was a mammoth amount of work. He's such a smart guy. I think his humor has always been there but the first **Basket Case** was such a struggle because there were so little resources. The humor to push to the front was darker.

U: The second one was completely different though...

GB: That's Frank. If anything, it trickled down to me or that's why we

get along so well. It's fantastic spending time with him. He's a businessman, he writes his stuff, which is phenomenal, he's got a great hook for the titles alone! And he's really funny. Frank's been an interesting touchstone to me in regards to Skinned Deep because he has done that delicate blend of taking horror and humor so it's accessible and walked that tightrope to where they're legendary films now. Right down the line from Basket Case to **Brain Damage** to Frankenhooker. He nails every single one. I love the comparison because (his movies) are violent but not offensive. It's funny and crass and it's not lowbrow.



"Granny"

U: And in all the right places.

GB: Which is hard. Sometimes the power of one or two frames is fascinating. Trying to get something to work, especially humor was harder than anything else. And then watching with an audience... you can't fake it. Either it works or it doesn't.

U: You've known Warwick for a while. Did you work on all of the Leprechaun movies?

GB: Yeah. Me and Warwick are the only ones that have been involved with each one. In fact, Lion's Gate is talking to us now about doing a commentary for a box set.

U: Which one is your favorite?

GB: It's funny. All films to me end up being my time capsule to life. It's the film plus what's happening in your world or it is your world. Leprechaun One was interesting, because I have a philosophy, never say no to a film if it's the title creature of the film. Even if it's low budget, because if you do your job right and the film is good then maybe it will hook. Meeting Warwick was a plus. I had no idea he was such a gentleman and such a talent. And hilarious. On those long nights we'd keep each other cracking up. It 's a lot to ask someone to be covered in rubber, spend three hours in a makeup chair and then go to work and still know how to bring the character to life. I really like Leprechaun Four too. It was a tour de force of effects.

U: I loved the pan in the face!

GB: The director, **Brian Trenchard Smith**, came to us and I said 'Let's hit him in the face with a pan, cartoon style.' We showed him the sculpture and he loved it. It was a great feeling after the screening when he came up to me and told me it was his favorite death in the movie. We had reckless abandon on it.

U: What are some of your new projects?

GB: **The Hollow** we finished. It stars **Stacey Keach**, **Judge Reinhold** and **Nick Carter**. It's a contemporary version of **Legend of Sleepy Hollow**. Awesome script. We designed the horseman's new look as well as his victims. He not only hacks their heads off, he carves their faces into pumpkins. It's pretty nasty.

U: What's ahead for you?

GB: I've been writing some stuff. But first would be business as usual. I love makeup effects. Even when we're not doing a job, I'm sculpting away either here or at home. I have no choice, it's taken over! It would be great to keep doing the effects stuff and every couple of years make a film. That would be fantastic. The big question is can I do it on my own terms?



There's no financial safety nets. You're on your own but you're on your own! You can do whatever you want.

Besides showing at the Guggenheim, *Skinned Deep* has won rave reviews and received a prestigious midnight screening at the coveted **San Sebastian Film Festival**. Gabe was ecstatic to report: "In Spain they were so gracious, the audience went completely wild for it. Total audio hootin' and hollerin' ALL the way through the entire film. They also threw plastic plates whenever the 'Plates' character was on screen. A total blast!" He's also added a new sound mix "in glorious 5:1! It sounds really big now!" *Skinned Deep* made its official US premier at San Francisco's **Another Hole in the Head Film Festival**, and a full theatrical release is planned for Summer 2004.

WHEN NOT WRITING FOR UNITSHIFTER, AMANDA BY NIGHT PROWLs THE VIDEO STORES OF LOS ANGELES SEARCHING FOR RARE MADE-FOR-TV HORROR FILMS.