

Penny Dreadful provides one more reason to stick to the major highways.



"PENNY DREADFUL"

Carred for life

Richard Brandes knew that he wanted something unique for his third directorial effort (following 2004's *Out for Blood* and 1995's *California Heat*), and he felt he had it when the script for *Penny Dreadful* was passed along by an associate. "I loved the idea of this girl being stuck in the car and having a phobia about that, and then having that phobia turned back on her by this twisted individual who preys upon her worst fears by trapping her in the car," says Brandes, whose career as an actor, producer and screenwriter stretches back to the '80s. "I thought that was a nice, unique hook that I hadn't seen before, and I liked the cat-and-mouse aspect."

Penny Dreadful (arriving on DVD alongside six of its fellow After Dark Horrorfest films March 27) stars Rachel (Bully) Miner as Penny Dearborn, a young woman afflicted by a fear of cars after seeing her parents die in a terrible auto accident. She goes on a road trip with her therapist, Orianna Volker (Mimi Rogers), to cure her of her phobia. But after the pair give a ride to a creepy hitchhiker they sideswipe on a dark, deserted road, the journey turns into a nightmare as the stranger sets off a chain of events intended to first terrorize the two women before subjecting them to an even more ghastly fate.

Brandes, who rewrote the original script by Diane Doniol-Valcroze and Arthur Flam, shot the film over 18 days in March 2005 at Big Bear Lake in California. The grueling shoot, done mostly at night, was made even more challenging by the brisk weather the production encountered. "It was really tough, especially filming it as fast as we did," recalls Brandes, who used to own a cabin in the area and had lensed several other films there. "We were literally shooting from sundown to sunup, and the temperature was in the teens

every night. That's a testament not just to the crew, but to the actors too, for Mimi and Rachel and everybody else to do what they had to do under those conditions."

Brandes recalls that the most difficult day of shooting was the very first, when they filmed the opening daytime sequence where Penny and Orianna stop at a gas station. "We had 60-mile-an-hour winds that day; there were literally sandstorms going on around us. But Mimi and Rachel were able to tough through that and make it work, and ultimately the wind looks great. It's very foreboding and ominous, and when I looked at it on screen, I thought, 'That looks great!' But while

we were shooting it, it was miserable."

That scene also features a memorable cameo by horror icon Michael Berryman, whose career extends from his breakout role in the 1977 *The Hills Have Eyes* to Rob Zombie's *The Devil's Rejects*. "Michael and I go pretty far back," Brandes says. "We've known each other 14, 15 years. I thought it would be cool to turn the tables on people, because when you see Michael, you think, 'Oh, he's gonna kill everybody!' So I thought it would be fun to have them bump into him in the opening scene and make the audience wonder what he was going to do to them, and of course he ends up being a nice guy."

Brandes has nothing but praise for his two female stars, both of whom are pushed to emotional as well as physical extremes within the film. "Rachel really fought for the role, and she impressed me right from the day she came into the casting director's office. She did her homework and could deliver on the character's emotions, so she stood out from the start and made quite an impression on me. Her work habits, her talent, it was all phenomenal. It was one of the best experiences I've ever had with an actor."

Rogers' role, on the other hand, required a different level of concentration due to a plot point we won't spoil here. Brandes agrees: "The challenge that she took on was tricky. But Mimi relished the opportunity and had a lot of fun with it."

Penny Dreadful's eerie setting and buildup of dread, along with its claustrophobic feel and a smattering of jump scares, evidently impressed After Dark Horrorfest founder Courtney Solomon when he saw the film. "We were initially talking about releasing it individually in a small number of theaters, and this was just as Horrorfest was being brought to fruition," Brandes says. "So we decided it would be fun to go the Horrorfest route and have it be part of that event, including coming out big on DVD through Lionsgate. It felt like a good way to go and a groundbreaking thing too, which was an aspect I liked a lot."

Brandes says he was pleased with the overall response to last November's festival, and is looking forward to the DVD release of *Penny Dreadful* and the rest of the Horrorfest collection. In the meantime, he's developing several other new projects, including an adaptation of a best-selling non-fiction book that he calls "pretty controversial and disturbing." But Brandes says that returning to the horror genre is definitely on his agenda: "I've always enjoyed these films as an audience member myself, so I'm just drawn to tell stories like that. And also I love the fans of this genre—they're very passionate about it, and it's great to see them get out and support something like Horrorfest. It's fun to be a part of that."

—Don Kaye



Parking in the woods is no fun at all for Penny (Rachel Miner).