

Seasoned Filmmaker Richard Brandes Shares the Ins-and-Outs of Making a Horror/Thriller Film

by Caros Choi



Director Richard Brandes on the set of *Penny Dreadful* (courtesy of Brandes Films International).

Richard Brandes, CEO of Brandes Films International, has a talent for producing high quality films on a low to moderate budget. Brandes is a seasoned filmmaker with 13 films to his credit including HBO's **Devil in the Flesh 1**, starring Rose McGowan, and **Devil in the Flesh 2**, starring Jodi Lyn O'Keefe. After directing **Out for Blood** starring Kevin Dillon and Lance Henriksen, and **Penny Dreadful** starring Rachel Miner and Mimi Rogers, Brandes had a new-found love for directing. He is currently working on the horror-thriller films **Whiplash** and **Dead Man's Bluff**. Hollywood Scriptwriter Magazine caught up with Brandes to talk to him about his new projects.

Hollywood Scriptwriter: *When did you first start making films? And when did you realize that this was what you wanted to do?*

Richard Brandes: Filmmaking is something I've wanted to do since I was a young boy in Georgia. I grew up with a vivid imagination. I used to create and perform plays in my backyard with my friends and invite the neighborhood to be my audience. My first job in film was in 1988 when I was hired to write a screenplay, but I first really started becoming a "filmmaker", in the truest sense of the word, in the early nineties as I branched out into other areas such as producing and directing.

What was the first film that you directed, produced, or wrote? What was it called and what is the premise of that film?

The first film I was hired to write was a thriller called **Party Line**. The story was about a wealthy and very demented brother and sister duo who lured married men over the then popular 976 telephone "party lines" into meeting them, and then killed them. The first film I was hired to produce was **The Fear** in 1994, which was about a group of college students who go on a retreat to explore their fears, which included a cameo by Wes Craven.

How did you begin your own production company? When did you realize that you wanted to start your own company?

I realized early on that producing would afford me the greatest creative control over my own scripts, as well as maintaining ownership of my films. It allowed me to build my own film library, which is an important asset; that was the motivation for starting my own company. My game plan from the start of my career was to try to get as much work as possible under my belt as a writer/producer/director in order to establish a track record and develop relationships with actors, crew, distributors, etc. Then start my own production company where I would be able to capitalize on those experiences and relationships. Most of the financing for my films have come primarily from distributors, so I still did not have the creative control or ownership position I had hoped for. Recently, however, I've partnered with Anita Sgarro, who has a background in venture capital, and we have now financed two films through pri-

vate equity, thereby allowing me much greater creative control. My latest film, **Penny Dreadful**, truly represents the first time I was able to make a film exactly as I conceived it from start to finish. Our goal now is to continue to make theatrically driven genre films based on this same business model.

I understand that you have taken on various roles – director, producer, actor – which do you prefer?

I think I enjoy writing and directing the most because they most directly help me scratch that creative itch. Producing has its challenges and rewards, but I mainly produce in order to try to maintain as much creative control as possible.

I noticed that many of your films are in the horror film-thriller genre. Is this the main genre that you are interested in? Are there any other genres that are of interest to you?

Ever since I was a kid I've always loved a good scary, edge of your seat thrill ride, and now that I'm a filmmaker, I enjoy the challenge of trying to create something that will give an audience that same experience. I also love a good, edgy drama. **Sling Blade** and **Monsters Ball** come to mind for instance. I would love to make a film that addresses important social issues or world events. Film has the power to educate, influence, inspire, and even change people for the better. It's one of the main reasons why I

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(Above) Trapped inside a car, Actor Rachel Miner (as Penny) screams frantically for help. (Right photo) Right to left - Screenwriter Richard Brandes directs Actor Rachel Miner in a scene of his new movie.

about ordinary epiphany, all the better. **Penny Dreadful**, for people who find instance, is about a therapist (Mimi Rogers) themselves thrust and her young female patient, Penny (Rachel Miner), who has a severe phobia of cars due into extraordinary circumstances. Sym- pathetic, vulnerable, killed her parents. The story centers around and even emotionally the road trip the two women take to go back wounded people who to the mountains where it all started in order have to suffer, to try to help Penny conquer those fears. We struggle and over- understand early on in the first few minutes



of the first act that Penny has her own personal demons to confront, and also that her relationship with her therapist has grown beyond just a doctor-patient relationship into a friendship

was motivated to become a filmmaker, so I would love to create something that could have that sort of impact and effect.

How do you pick a film to work on?

I prefer character-driven stories, so the first thing that generally attracts my attention are the characters. I am a huge Hitchcock fan, so I've always been attracted to stories

come in- s u r - m o u n t - a b l e odds just to stay alive really appeal to me. If, in the process, they have to confront their own demons and as a result obtain some sort of personal

with an almost mother-daughter bond. By the time we find them in the mountains on a cold, lonely road at night with a mysterious and sinister stranger stalking and terrorizing them, we really care and sympathize with their plight and get completely caught up in their ordeal.

How do you develop innovative horror-thriller film concepts?

I try to find something fresh and different - something that stays true to the genre and has a good overall hook that will grab the audience's attention from the start. I also ask myself these questions: Does the idea have the potential to break new ground, and perhaps even more importantly, frighten people? Does it frighten me? Once I have an idea, I usually prefer to approach the development of it from the characters' viewpoints first. Who's my protagonist and who is my antagonist? What is their relationship to the story, to each other? Then it generally all seems to fall into place for me from there.

What do you think are the essential ingredients to make a great/successful horror/thriller film?

First, conflict is, of course, the basis for all good stories: human vs. human, human vs. nature, human vs. the system, human vs. the supernatural, etc. So, conflict is naturally the first key ingredient for all good horror films and thrillers. Second, the cast

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of characters. You *have* to have one or more protagonists that the audience will care about and root for, as well as one or more antagonists that they can love to hate and root against. Put your heroes in a life and death situation against a powerful and deadly adversary with seemingly insurmountable odds.

If you can incorporate a ticking clock, a race against time, that's working against your protagonist, even better. Maybe it's a race to escape from somewhere in addition to fighting off the bad guy, or monster, as the case may be, or it could even be nature itself. In **Penny Dreadful** there's a snow storm approaching that threatens the protagonists' survival in addition to the killer who's stalking and tormenting them. The storm and dropping temperatures add one more obstacle for our protagonists to deal with and helps to provide something of a "ticking clock."

timate showdown between the two at the climax of the film.

Of course most horror films also need some sort of "body count." The victims tend to pile up along the way as horror stories progress and I think fans of this genre have grown to expect that to some degree. The more clever and creative the killings, the better. Sometimes the "less is more" approach can work well with these sort of films too because you encourage the audience to use its imagination. The trick is knowing how to balance the two and still deliver what is expected. **Penny Dreadful** has plenty of gore, but it also delivers a very disturbing psychological punch that is anchored in reality, giving the viewer the unsettling feeling that what happens to these two women is very plausible and could happen to anyone under similar circumstances.

It's absolutely crucial that you get the best-looking, best-sounding film possible, and the most important way to insure that happens is to prepare thoroughly during pre-production and hire the best cast and crew possible, especially when it comes to the line producer, cinematographer, production designer and sound person. A good, experienced crew will help you stay on schedule and on budget, as well as help you utilize your time efficiently in order to get the coverage you need. Which brings me to my own personal mantra as a director — coverage, coverage, coverage! To give your film that big budget feel, you need to make sure you have a lot of coverage so that you can give yourself a lot of choices in the editing room and so you don't paint yourself into a corner creatively. You should try to get all the coverage you need during principal photography in order to avoid having to go back out and do re-

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A good hook certainly helps with these types of films, too. Something unique and fresh that sets it apart. This can be rooted either in the characters themselves, the setting, the circumstances or a combination of all three. The hook in **Penny Dreadful**, for instance, is very unique and hasn't been seen before, but it isn't something I should disclose here because it catches the audience off guard and would spoil the big surprise twist in the film.

Pacing is key, too. Horror-thrillers need to have a momentum that is driven by unforeseen twists in the plot, as well as what I call those "close your eyes, goose bump" moments of heart-pounding suspense and — terror. Moments that the audience doesn't necessarily see coming and that seemingly stack the odds up more and more against our protagonist and more and more in favor of the antagonist, propelling us toward that ul-

Last, but certainly not least, is style. The style you choose can enhance the telling of your story considerably, but it should not get in the way or call too much attention to itself. Because color plays such a crucial role in **Penny Dreadful**, I created a digital intermediate in post, which allowed me greater creative flexibility. Unfortunately, especially with a lot of the recent developments in digital technology, a lot of films these days seem to be all about style over substance, and the stories sometimes seem to get compromised or sacrificed along the way. Whatever style one chooses I think it is important to remember to make sure it serves the best interests of telling your story.

Some of the films you produce have low to moderate budgets. What techniques do you employ to make the picture seem like a big budget film?

My personal mantra as a producer has always been "put the money on the screen".

shoots or pickups, which in the low budget arena may not be affordable and could send the production over budget. I'm not one of those people who say "we'll fix it in post."

You don't want to end up in post trying to figure out how to make the film look and sound better.

When I say hire the best crew possible, I don't necessarily mean the most expensive either. There are a lot of talented people out there looking for an opportunity to "step up," where the motivation for taking the job is not money, but getting the opportunity to advance their career. The trick is to be able to recognize their talent and be willing to take the calculated risk of giving them that chance.

For instance, on **Penny Dreadful**, the cinematographer, Joplin Wu, had mostly music videos to his credit. But, I felt his work on those videos exhibited a great artistic eye

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for composition and an edgy sensibility that would work well for what I needed on **Penny**. Fortunately for me, my hunch paid off. The cinematography on **Penny** is outstanding and Joplin was a great collaborator and a real asset to the film.

In your opinion, what are the advantages or disadvantages of taking a novel and making it into a movie? Is that something you would be interested in doing and if so, are there any potential novels that you have in mind?

I suppose the advantage of adapting a novel would be that you already have a thoroughly developed story with built in public interest and a ready-made audience. However, the cost of acquiring the rights to a popular novel can be prohibitive for independent filmmakers because, generally speaking, you will many times be competing with the studios or other companies with much deeper pockets than yours. This is one of the primary reasons I have not pursued this particular course and at this time have no novels in mind for acquisition or development.

Is there any advice that you can offer to aspiring screenwriters?

Passion, perseverance, and hard work really can and do pay off in this business. You should also make yourself available to opportunity and recognize it when it presents itself. That might sound simple, but you'd be surprised how many people who want to get into this business don't appreciate that basic advice and, for whatever reason, don't recognize an opportunity when it's there. If you're a writer, read as many produced, successful scripts of films that you have seen as possible to learn the language and structure of telling a story through film, and just write, write, write! People ask me all the time about film school and, while I certainly have nothing against film school, I usually tell people if they really want to be a part of this business, and don't have any other means to get their foot in the door, no matter what your ultimate goal — writer, director, producer — you should do whatever you can to get a job on a film set. Any kind of job. Even if it's as an intern or production assistant. And when you do get a job on a film production

check your ego at the door, keep your ears and eyes open, be a sponge, learn as much as you can about everything you can, and make a good impression on people so they'll remember you for the next one and take an interest in you and your ultimate goals.

You are currently working on two projects. When are these slated to come out?

We've already scouted locations for two films based on scripts that I wrote. One is a twisted thriller called **The Last Seduction** and the other is called **Red Rock West**, a film about murder, greed, lust, and betrayal with a classic femme fatale lead. We expect to be starting production on **Raising Arizona** and **True Romance** after the first of the year.

For more information on the film **Penny Dreadful** and Richard Brandes log onto www.pennydreadfulthemovie.com and www.brandesfilms.com.