

FATHOMS OF FRIGHT

The French-Canadian "Death Dive" seeks to make its mark outside Quebec.

By CHRIS ALEXANDER

At the dawn of genre filmmaking in French Canada, financing and distribution mavericks like Cinepix (which backed David Cronenberg's *Shivers* and *Rabid*) soon discovered that horror could be big business globally—but at home, the mainstream was wildly opposed to such

FANGORIA: The idea of nautical horror harks back to classics like *The Twilight Zone* and, especially, John Carpenter's *The Fog*. Can you speak on your influences for *Death Dive*?

ALAIN VÉZINA: I've always been a fan of stories featuring haunted ships and ghosts of the sea. I adore the supernatural maritime tales of William Hope Hodgson, author of *The Ghost Pirates* among others. John Carpenter's *The Fog* influenced me quite a bit, as well as Amando de Ossorio's *The Ghost Galleon*, whose script has a few flaws but which contains several very effective scenes of pure mood and atmosphere. To me, the ocean is still a vast and mysterious expanse where many secrets dwell. If an old, abandoned Victorian house is terrifying when it is believed to be haunted, imagine how scary a wreck can be, unexplored for years and where the human remains of its victims still lie. I believe that such a place is the perfect setting for the supernatural.

FANG: There's a great, gauzy look to the film.

VÉZINA: Thank you. My director of photography, Jean Kavanagh, was also very inspired by horror cinema of the '80s, and made good use of backlighting, smoke and saturated colors. Also, camera movements were more fluid back then, whereas today they tend to be more handheld. *Death Dive* illustrates

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nostalgia for the fantasy films of that decade, in both its themes and aesthetic choices.

FANG: It also has an evocative score.

VÉZINA: Yes, I agree. Réjean Doyon's music is very effective and contributes quite a bit to establishing the atmosphere. I had worked with Réjean before on my documentaries, and have always appreciated his music. For this movie, I suggested that he listen to several soundtracks I particularly liked,



The jaws don't have to be alive to be deadly.

fare being produced on its turf. See, once upon a time, the Catholic Church doubled as Quebec's cinema censor board, and Cinepix and the production entities that followed were working against a hard-wired imagined morality dictating what you could and could not see.

While times have changed and more forward creative thinkers have tapped into the love of stranger, darker, fantastical film culture in Montreal (we applaud you, Fantasia), there is still a staggering cultural bias against horror in La Belle Province. Witness the recent debacle surrounding FX wizard Remy Couture, whose innocuous gore gags were the focus of a long legal battle (see GOREZONE #34 for the full story); now, in a less draining but no less telling turn, the Quebec-shot *Le Scaphandrier* (a.k.a. *Death Dive*) was met with universal sneers and jeers by the mainstream French-language press, which helped ensure the film was not as visible or embraced as it should have been.

Alain Vézina's chiller sees a journalist and her treasure-hunting friend investigating the myth of the *Princess of the North*, a shipwreck that may contain substantial submerged booty, and becoming embroiled in brutal murders committed by a phantom figure dressed in an ancient iron diving outfit. The blood flows freely, the atmosphere swells, characters act oddly and yes, zombies crash the party. Soon to be released in English Canada on VOD, *Death Dive* has yet to find U.S. distribution. FANGORIA talked with Vézina about his unique chiller.

Photos: Copyright Boreal Films



From still waters comes a deep-sea diver with punishment on his mind.

such as the one for the Thai film *Shutter* and Rick Wilkins' music for *The Change-ling*. Basically, we wanted a moody, mysterious theme to accompany the character of Julie during her investigation, and another theme, more rhythmic and stressful, for when the diver commits his murders.

FANG: You have a decorated history of making documentary films concerning stories and mysteries of the sea. Is *Death*

“A shipwreck where the dead still rest is a cemetery; therefore, diving to remove their personal effects is sacrilege.”

Dive's central mythology, the story of the *Princess of the North*, based on fact?

VÉZINA: It was inspired by the *Empress of Ireland* shipwreck, which took place in 1914 on the Saint Lawrence River in Quebec, and took the lives of 1,012 people. In 1998, I shot a documentary about this event that was sold to television stations all over Canada and Europe. After that, I became somewhat of an expert in maritime disaster documentaries, and directed five of them in total. This taught me a lot about shipwrecks and the recovery of artifacts from them, and I used all of this knowledge when writing *Death Dive*. In fact, several characters are inspired by individuals I met or interviewed while shooting my documentaries. As for the *Rubaiyat*, the book that both the Sauvageau character and the deep-sea diver want to possess, it is an actual treasure lost somewhere within the *Titanic*. You could say that my script is based on several factual accounts.

FANG: With that historical grounding and the treasure-hunt narrative, do you consider this a horror picture, or an action-adventure with supernatural elements?

VÉZINA: In my opinion, *Death Dive* is definitely a slasher film with some humorous scenes. I also wish to stress that it is not a zombie film. During filming, the local media put much emphasis on the presence of the undead, going as far as publishing articles with sensational titles like “The first zombie film made in Quebec.” This is a story of the dead taking revenge on graverobbers, in much the same way the

mummy of an Egyptian high priest will punish an archaeologist for stealing his treasure. I'm a big fan of Terence Fisher's *The Mummy*, and in a way, it inspired my movie. A shipwreck where the remains of the dead still rest is a cemetery; therefore, diving to remove their personal effects is sacrilege. Instead of a mummy, it is a living-dead deep-sea diver that returns to punish the thieves. Humor is added to this cautionary tale, such as the ways in which the killer slays his victims.

FANG: Movies shot on water often have troubled productions. Any tales of woe to share?

VÉZINA: The film was mostly shot on the banks of the Saint Lawrence River, near Rimouski. Thankfully, the weather was favorable. I would have liked to film more on the water, but the logistics were complicated. The first scene aboard the police barge, on rough water at night, made the whole crew seasick. The script girl, the director of photography and I were all confined to a small cabin which was constantly rocking, staring at a monitor which was also rocking. An hour later, we were all feeling pretty queasy.

FANG: There's no nice way of putting this: The Quebec press savaged the film. Why?

VÉZINA: As you know, Quebec critics have historically disdained all genre pictures. They have a strong liking for auteur indie films and wide-appeal comedies; anything else seems to be frowned upon. They seem insulted that Quebec filmmakers would even attempt to make a genre movie, as if this was the sole propriety of the U.S. So they view these films with much greater scrutiny, picking away at things they consider shortcomings and never viewing them as a whole, or seeing the greater picture—which means they often miss things like the director's point of view, the atmosphere he creates, the humor or the amazing effects.

This is a shame, as a film should be seen not in comparison to what Hollywood pumps out with multimillion-dollar budgets, but what it actually is and what it achieves with its audience. Ask people who have actually screened *Death Dive*, and they will tell you they had a blast watching it. ★★



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