

DEVELOPMENT HELL

The word "HELL" is rendered in a classic, bold, blackletter-style font. Above the top of the letters 'E', 'L', and 'L' in "HELL", there are several vertical, flame-like shapes in a light gray color, giving the impression of fire rising from the word.

DEVELOPMENT HELL

A Novel
Written & Directed by

MICK GARRIS



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First Edition

for Cynthia

1

A Life in the Cinema

THE MEXICAN WOMAN'S FREAK baby might have been the worst thing ever to happen to her, but it could have been the best thing in the world ever to happen to me.

I'd much rather show it than tell it, but that's just not the way things work out in this hallowed town. You hear all that shit about only being as good as your last picture, and all those other hoary old saws about the Industry-with-a-capital-I, but that's ancient Hollywood masturbatory storytelling. If you're smart, you get your next picture set up before the last one comes out. You're as good as your last two.

I guess.

It started with film school. We didn't have the kind of money you need to go to S.C. and use all that stuff Steven and George bought for them, but I did get a scholarship at UCLA. So you make do, right?

It was great! I mean, just imagine having all that equipment to use

for nothing! Sure, most of the study work had to be done on digital video, but the thesis was always shot on film, with sync sound, even optical titles. I shot mine in 35mm 'scope and THX and DTS Digital Surround.

One good thing about UCLA is the agent connection. You make a good film or write a good script, and every door off Wilshire Blvd. suddenly opens up to you. It's like dogs smelling a bitch in heat. Make a short film on your own, and even if it's *The Fucking Titanic*, nobody's ever going to see it unless it comes from film school.

So that's what happened. It took me a year and a half to finish *Words Without Voices*, but it was worth it. I badgered my way into incredible locations, built weird, wonderful sets that represented every dreamscape you could imagine (and many you couldn't, I'm sure), got a full orchestral original score, and made my 24-minute epic.

If you know lighting, manipulation, composition, and you throw away the zoom lens, directing's easy.

After copyrighting the film in my name, and not the school's (they weren't going to make money off of *my* talent), I submitted it to film festivals around the world, and started collecting ribbons. First place at AFI Fest, first place at Worldfest in Houston, honorable mention in Palm Springs (fuck 'em. Who cares about Palm Springs?).

And then you learn about taking meetings. I got calls from The Firm, William Morris, Immaculate, Endeavour, CAA, the whole catalogue. The hungry young guys have the most hustle, but the old Jewish farts have the connections and the clients. Maybe you wouldn't want to eat with them, but they know how to get a deal greenlit. I learned quick that it's the agent, not the agency that makes the difference. The old guys are never too eager to take on the new clients, but some of them can be convinced. Eventually.

All of them wanted me to leave a videotape of my film—can you imagine that? I shot it in Panavision, spent three weeks on the surround mix, and they're going to glance at it through phone calls on a nineteen-inch Sampo screen. I know these lazy bastards all have

DEVELOPMENT HELL

screening rooms, so I insisted that they run the film in 35. I was nice about it and everything, but very persistent, so they'd know they were dealing with an artist.

Well, I got the pick of the litter. I made a couple of mistakes first, like everybody does. One of these ten-percenters got real excited about getting me a *CSI: Miami* meeting; as if I would even consider television drek. Another one thought getting me a sequel would speed things up. Right. Do *Halloween 20: The Wheezing Old Franchise* and Hollywood spreads its legs. Then, who knows? Maybe *Air Bud 5!*

Finally, old Rosen at Spectacular Artists and I reach an understanding. I mean, you don't want to watch this toothless clown in the hair-hat take meals, but he knows how to throw his ninety-eight pounds around. We don't want to make development deals, he says, we want to make Movies. No TV, no cable. Theatrical features only. My scripts, full purchase only, no options. Pay *and* play.

It's good cop/bad cop time. I'm taking meetings in high-altitude offices on every lot, with Walter and Sherry and Joe and Jeffrey and all the big boys, discovering how easy all of this can be.

Thank God for film school. These guys love to talk about how there's such a void left by Preston Sturges and Alfred Hitchcock and how there's never been an American equivalent to *The Bicycle Thief* and all that other dinosaur shit I flunked in Film History 101. And then I talk Carpenter, Dante, Hooper, Cameron, Fincher, Bay: my gods. They like that, but only if you talk *Poltergeist* and not *Lifeforce*, *Halloween* and not *The Thing*, *Titanic* and not *True Lies*, *Seven* and not *Alien 3*. The supreme measure of art is worldwide box-office.

So I pitch them my movies, and listen to their reactions. They give me their "thoughts," and I get all excited about some of their ideas, as though they just made my story better than I ever could have done alone. Then I hang back and consider their "notes" a few moments, before telling them why those ideas don't work. They get a feeling of

give and take, that I'm willing to listen to their suggestions, and yet that I'm strong enough to defend my own ideas. They like me.

My job is to charm them, then Rosen gets to be the asshole. But that's okay, he's used to that. He *likes* that. He wheels and deals, gets the studios fighting over me, the price goes into the stratosphere, and I get to make my movie in Burbank.

Now there's an experience. At UCLA, you've got everybody and his grandmother thrilled to death to be a part of a movie (tell them it'll be on premium cable, and you can canoodle and doodle any of the prime, Grade A meat who took their clothes off for free on camera). Everybody works twenty hours a day, just for the sake of making your movie. Commitment, creativity, drive: everybody wants to help out.

But the studio experience is something else again. First, there's the unions; you've never seen so many people to do so few things. You kick out a plug, a union electrician has to plug it in. You're just about to shoot the crucial shot you and the cameraman (excuse me—cinematographer) have been setting up for the last three hours, and the assistant director calls lunch. Of course, everybody dicks around when they get there, so you can't start on time, but there is no going over, or you're into triple golden time.

And then there's the twenty-seven teamster drivers who are assigned to the show, sitting on their asses in their air-conditioned station wagons, waiting around at four grand a week, in case somebody needs a Diet Dr. Pepper at the Company Store.

But that's the least of it. That shit I can understand. These guys make a living, they go through the motions of a real, live job, and they get paid. The Suits are worse. I mean, I wear a tie on the set; when you can still get into Disneyland on a Junior ticket, and shaving is an exercise in wishful thinking, you do anything you can to direct from a position of power. But these fuckers in their Armanis, with their illegal Cuban cigars and soft voices are the reason why all the movies you see are shit. Okay, here's how they think. What does "good" mean to you?

DEVELOPMENT HELL

Quality? Great. You and I think alike. But “good” to these guys is “familiar”. Good is somebody else’s hit. God forbid you make something unique, with an original vision. No, they want the “heart” of *Spider-Man*, the “visual kinetics” of *Attack of the Clones*, the “pacing” of *XXX*, the “gloss” of *Harry Potter*, shit like that. All they know how to sell is what they know how to sell. And that, not very well, since something like nineteen out of twenty movies tank at the boxoffice.

So once we’re in pre-production, there are the fights. They want storyboards, and I don’t work with storyboards. We hire an illustrator to keep them happy, knowing full well I’m never going to look at the fucking little cartoons once I’m on the set.

Then there’s casting. Oh, God, you wouldn’t believe the names they want in my movie. If it was up to me—and believe me, it wasn’t—I’d cast all unknowns. I want you to see the characters I’ve created, not famous actors in the roles. But no. I write the scientist role patterned on an old high school biology teacher of mine, and they want Tom Cruise. Tom fucking Cruise to play a biogeneticist! For the social worker they can get Gwyneth Paltrow...but they’d have to give her dad posthumous executive producer credit. Ultimately, it doesn’t matter who I want, because with money and schedule and billing and studio problems, nobody is available anyway. At least not until you get down to the bottom of the list. Dreg city. And they can’t get good international distribution without a major star.

And then, of course, there is the wonderfully creative hand of Mr. Flotsam, our esteemed producer. He “developed” this “package”, and his involvement is primarily to bring in Mark Snow for the music, and he gets a presentation credit for that. For that he should get a black eye! This film demands a full orchestra, and I get a fucking synthesizer programmer from some long-gone wannabe “*Twilight Zone*” TV series!

Somehow, *Expiration* gets into production. Once the train starts

careening out of control down the hill, there is no stopping it. Digital Domain is already shooting plates for the effects shots, the dailies are coming in, the Suits are bitching about diffusion and coverage and boom shadows. They haven't the slightest idea how a movie is made. All I can say is Trust Me. I know what I'm doing. You're going to love it when it's cut. Of course, that's not enough for them. They're insisting on more coverage, at the same time they're bitching about going over schedule and budget. And this isn't *Godzilla* or *Battlefield Earth*—this is just a lousy twelve million bucks they're talking about!

Okay, I admit I can be a bit, well, tyrannical on the set. But do you blame me? My name is on the line. Written and directed by. Me. Nobody notices the accountant's name. Nobody cares about who cut the film, or who shot it, or who cast the extras or did the digital mattes. Nobody gives fuck one about costume design or the sound mix. So, yeah. If it's going to get done, it's going to get done right...even if it means a little more time and money. What are they going to do, fire me and replace me, twenty-five days in on a forty-five day shoot?

So maybe a couple of thespians cried...it's the performance that counts, not how you get it. The only thing anybody can judge is what's on the screen. And actors! They'll do anything! Unless they're "names", of course. Then the fucking spoiled little prima donna babies won't even give you so much as a little nipple. You've never seen a less cooperative group of people.

I never set out to win a popularity contest; I just wanted to make my film.

So we made it. It wasn't that much over budget; I mean, it wasn't *Town and Country*, or anything like that. Maybe a couple million over; they spend that on their kids' preschool. So they sneaked my cut, like the Director's Guild requires. The preview cards were okay—not as good as we hoped, but okay. And it wasn't made for the carbohydrate crowd anyway. This is a sophisticated film, and they preview it for the horny-handed machinists and their toothless girlfriends in