

Zombies in Rubber: An Interview with Jake West

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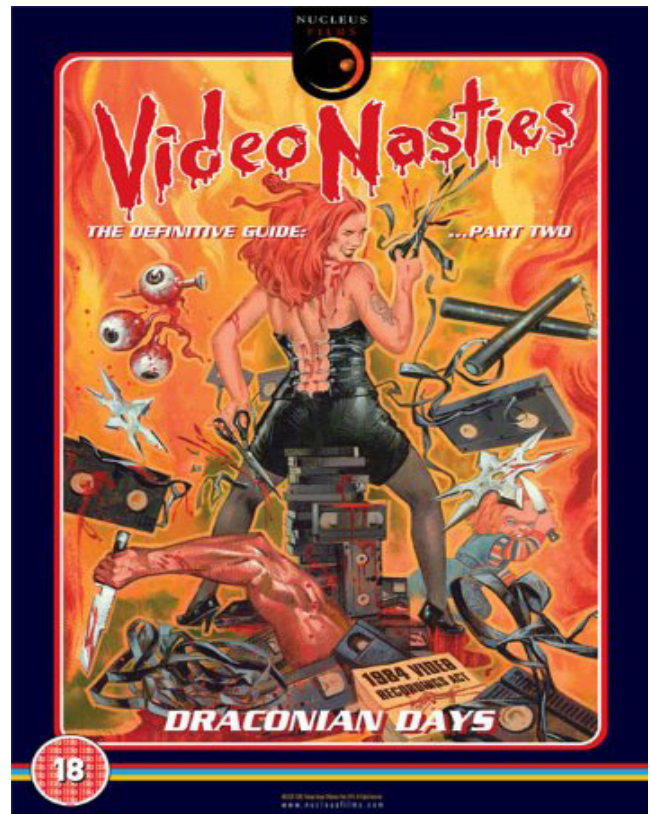
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Jake West is one of the British Horror revival's most important contributors, demonstrating that with enough creativity and hard work it is possible to build a career as an independent director in the UK.

Intensive discussed Jake's entire career in time for the release of his latest documentary *Video Nasties: Draconian Days* (2014), the follow-up to his hugely successful *Video Nasties: Moral Panic, Censorship and Videotape* (2010), an in-depth exploration of the impact of the rise of unregulated VHS in the UK during the 1980s.

Jake West: My career in filmmaking kicked off at West Kent College (in Tonbridge, Kent). It wasn't until I went there that I could get my hands on video cameras. So all this early stuff was shot on VHS using college equipment. It was a Panasonic camera, then they got in some U-Matic edit suites. They had some U-Matic decks so we had to transfer all the footage over to U-Matic to actually edit it.

To begin with we got fairly lame briefs, like, 'We want you to make a video about how to use the college library', so I would loosely interpret that into 'I should do a remake of *Ghostbusters* called *Spookbusters* because that's got a library in it!' So I did a 30 minute remake of *Ghostbusters* with a two or three minute section in the middle in the library, and we stopped to show you how to borrow a book. I was learning and it was great fun. You had very basic equipment, it's not like today when you've got computers and stuff, so everything was done with a lot of enthusiasm, roping in friends to act. It was a fun time. I made a film called *The Trainspotter*, which I shot at



West's latest documentary - *Video Nasties: Draconian Days*.

Tunbridge Wells Heritage railway line. It's kind of a comedy about the last day in the life of a trainspotter, who goes down there and confronts a gang who are trying to kill him, and he ends up killing them. It's all done in a comic-book style, and was only twelve minutes long. That was the closest to what I did later, as it had a narrative.

AS: How did you get your first film, *Razor Blade Smile*, into cinemas?

Razor Blade Smile was made for £20,000 and we shot it on 16mm. I edited it on a two-machine Beta suite, quite similar to the U-Matic but Beta decks. When I finished that film we basically had a video master and I took it down to Cannes and screened a promo trailer for some companies and they thought they could get a cinema release. To do that they needed to spend at least £150,000 to get the neg(ative) cut and make prints, and we had to do a Dolby Digital surround mix, so that was an expensive process, plus we got paid some money for the film as well. They spent quite a bit of money bumping a £20,000 film up to a cinema release. So it was one of the cheapest British movies that's ever been released. We sold the rights to that for 25 years. Until then it's nothing to do with me. We actually got quite a good deal. It sounds bad - it is bad in a way.

I was really surprised it got a theatrical release. I thought at best we would get it out on video. That's why we telecined the rushes on to Beta and I cut it on video because I thought at best we would get a VHS release. It was a big surprise to me when we managed to get a theatrical release. If anything I would have tried to raise more money! I had been working as a runner at a company and I got promoted. I went to a company that specialised in trailers. I'd always specialised in editing after I went to West Kent College. I used to edit most people's films, I was a pretty good editor which has always stood me in good stead. It's a skill that you can sell, so I managed to score a job working for a company that made film trailers, which is also useful when you're making your first film. I only worked as a runner for six weeks then I had a job as an editor! Which was good. I did that for a year or so, and I saved about £12,000 and the rest of the budget. I got a couple of grand off my dad, and a couple from other people, and that was the budget. I thought, 'I'm not going to do another short film', because I'd been to film school and done short films, and there's no market for short films. You couldn't get them shown in cinemas, and if you wanted to put them out in festivals, you had to have expensive festival prints made up. So for £20,000 I made a film on film and made it ninety minutes long. It just seemed like a smart move at the time.

Were you shooting it around your day job?

No. I quit my day job to do it. Part of the film was shot in his office, and I edited the film with his equipment. He let me use the editing suite for free, so when they stopped working at 6.30 I would go in and be there all night, and stop in the morning when they came back. We shot the film in three weeks straight. Twenty-one days with a crew of six or seven people, 16mm, shot on an Arri SR2, very basic kit, a few lenses, a Nagra Three or Four for sound. It was shot very rock-and-roll, from the hip. Once again, those days of shooting at college, being my own crew on VHS, served me well because it always meant I was quite used to doing most things. It's useful to be self sufficient. That's how that film got made, but I didn't have a game plan. I was only 26 when I did that. I'd been working for a year and I thought, 'What's the worst thing that could happen?' If it fails then I just go and get a job again. And the guy I was working for wanted to re-hire me. In fact he still hires me as a freelancer to this day, so it's never changed my fortunes in terms of getting work.

***Evil Aliens* was your second feature, but there were a few years between that and *Razor Blade Smile*.**

Razor Blade Smile was a big success for me. It was shot in 1996 and was released in 1998. I had to eye-match the whole film to get it neg cut, which was a painful process. When we did get it out I did a world tour of festivals. We played a lot of slots, and that was really good fun but it takes a lot of time. By the time that was over I was a bit burned out and I needed to start earning some money again. Marc Morris and I had started Nucleus Films to start doing DVD extras for different companies. There were a lot of people re-releasing cult movies at that time. We were knowledgeable and fans of that stuff so we started doing behind-the-scenes and retrospectives, and there's quite a lot of work around. We got stuck into that and we built the company up to start releasing our own films as well. That's another thing I've always been interested in: getting movies I like out there in collectors editions, that was close to my heart. In the meantime I'd been asked to write a sequel to *Razor Blade Smile*

so I wrote a script which took about a year but they felt the budget was going to be too high so it got shelved. I had to go back to the drawing board which took me another year of writing, and having to work to pay the rent, which can be difficult. That's why it took such a long time to get a script which could get financed, which was *Evil Aliens*. I then went out and raised the money privately, which was why it was £287,000 budget. That's the best I could get at the time.

That's a pretty big jump from £20,000.

It's not bad! It was quite a gap from my first one, and a lot of filmmakers will tell you that for some reason it's harder getting a second film made than your first. Unless you have a really big hit with your first film, like everyone wants to start with *Reservoir Dogs* or *Citizen Kane* but they don't. Most filmmakers start off with a film that is hopefully solid enough for people to think you've got a bit of talent. Being in the UK, making horror back in the time when we were doing it, horror was looked down upon in the late 1990s. In a pre-*Shaun of the Dead* world a lot of British companies weren't interested in making horror films. That was some of the resistance. Originally I wrote a script called *The Dead and The Damned* after I couldn't get *Razor Blade Smile 2* made. That was going to be a zombie film before zombie films were successful again. I couldn't get any producers interested. People said zombie films were dead. The reason to do one was because no one had done one for twenty years! Like when I did *Razor Blade Smile* there hadn't been a British-produced vampire movie for twenty years. I'd gone back to a genre that we used to be successful at. In the end it was an alien abduction film, maybe because it had a sci-fi edge or because there was some interest in alien abductions. It seemed to connect more than the zombie film that I couldn't get off the ground in 2002.

Are there plans to do something else with the *Razor Blade Smile 2* script, just to get the story out there?

I've thought about it, but because it was developed with Palm Pictures there's a rights issue - they own the rights to the characters. As much as I would like

to do that, unless they did it, it won't fly. We did talk about comics or animations. Once something stalls like that there tends to be a loss of enthusiasm, but there are some really great things in that script. There's a couple of things that I've cannibalised for other things, but there are still things I'd really like to do. I have thought about rewriting an entirely new vampire film with a couple of those elements in. We'll see. I haven't got to that stage yet because life has lead me down other paths.

***Evil Aliens* was very ambitious, special effects-wise. Was that you determined to make your mark, to show, 'This is what I can do now?'**

Absolutely. It was at the point where computers were changing, The Apple G5 had just come out and I found it in the States. We were one of the first people to shoot a film in HD, high-definition video. It was shot on the new Sony camera. Prior to that it cost an absolute fortune to edit HD video because no post-production houses were set up to edit HD apart from at the extremely high end. Everything else was still being done on 35mm. No one was doing HD transfers. It was still a standard-def world. But there was a company in Australia which is now Black Magic Digital, they had released a thing called the Cona HD card which you could get for your G5 and basically you could use that to edit HD footage in real time. And if you got a Raid Array, which was a expensive thing at the time, it cost about £14,000, if you had this you had in theory the computing power to edit HD video. I put together this plan: With the amount of digital effects needed to do this story I had to keep it in the digital world. If I'd had to source those effects out to do them in 35mm it would have cost too much. I managed to work out a way of doing it using the technology that was emerging. It hadn't been tested at that time so I was going out on a bit of a limb, and I'd become friends with a good CG artist who had his own kit. We set up a little effects facility in my flat in Camden, and we had five computers chained together in a render farm, and basically they were running for about a year to create the visual effects which now look quite dated, but at the time it was as good as you could get it. It was me and him

that did all the compositing, he did the 3D stuff, it took us over a year to do those shots. That was a two man team. If you look at a proper Hollywood film they have thousands of people. It was fairly insane but we were confident we could do it. Once again we could only do it if we had enough time to do it that way. Because I managed to find some private money, and I said, 'Look, this is going to take us a long time in post, but it's what we want to do', and we bought all that kit, and it meant we could sell it all when we had finished and they could get some money back on the hardware if they wanted to.

You hadn't burned it all out?

The Raid was in surprisingly good shape. It was one of the Apple Xserve Raids, one of those really big tank metal ones with twelve bays. They were designed for continuous operation. They were designed not to be switched off. The landlady noticed that the electricity bill in my flat had gone up by 2000%! I had to give her quite a bit of money, and it was so hot in that basement flat. It was hell in there. It was a sweat-box.

I'm assuming that you enjoyed the experience. The film was a real step up for you.

Yes, it was great. It was my love-letter to the kind of films I'd loved growing up, like *Evil Dead*, *Bad Taste*, *Brain Dead*, the (Sam) Raimi/Peter Jackson splatter movies. Those were the films I loved as a teenager and I wanted to make a film in that spirit. It was an unapologetic, completely juvenile film designed for teenagers to sit down and have a laugh at, there was nothing serious about it. We were slightly taking the piss out of the media, but apart from that it was designed to be a fun splatter-fest, and that's what we delivered. I wanted to make the deaths as gory as I could with the money that we had, and we did some brilliant prosthetic work on that film as well. Like my homage to *Cannibal Holocaust*, where the guy gets impaled on the spike, and you've got Emily Booth having her head ripped off and her full spine coming out; some really nifty, full-on prosthetics. I really enjoyed that. It was fun, but hard work. When we were shooting it, the thing that really unlocked it and

made it possible for us to do it is that I needed to shoot it on a real farm. You can't fake a farm, you either have one or you don't. I asked all of my friends, and one - another filmmaker Adam Mason - grew up in the deeper countryside up in the Fenlands, and a friend of his, his parents owned a farm. We went and met up with them and said what we wanted to do. We needed access to a real combine harvester and we had to buy the field of crops that we destroyed. We had to pay for that because obviously they grow that and sell it. We were using very dangerous farm machinery. That was all real. The farm became our film studio, and we all lived there. The whole crew lived there for 4 weeks, then we did half a week in London and a bunch of stuff down on the coast in Dorset, Wookey Hole, places like that. It was great fun.

The film offers a fairly pessimistic view of humanity; all the characters are self-absorbed or very cruel to others. The UFO expert is not even sympathetic, and you don't even have a final girl, which I was expecting. Is there a character that your sympathies were with, or were you quite happy to kill everybody off?

In retrospect, it was one of my earlier scripts, so I don't think I was as aware perhaps of the rules of narrative conventions as I should have been, but I was of the idea that in a horror film everyone should be fair game and one of the things that I liked about this... a lot of people complain in horror films that people survive, they would never survive, so I thought, 'Actually why don't I just kill everybody?' It's the aliens that are evil but even they become victims as well. So everyone is fair game in a splatter film. It was designed for maximum chaos to be honest. You could argue that is a problem for someone watching it, they could say, 'You haven't got a sympathetic enough character', which is fair, I can take that as fair comment.

The idea of 'evil aliens' works both ways. For the aliens coming to the Earth the humans are the evil aliens.

That was designed to work both ways, because they are, they are all lunatics; you've got the film crew

Eileen Daly as Lilith Silver, *Razor Blade Smile* (1998).



faking stuff, you've got the farmers who are would-be rapists. Ultimately maybe I do have a very bleak view of the human race! It's not true, I do get on well with a lot of people and like a lot of people, but for the purposes of an extreme splatter film, character depth was something I wasn't really going for. Even if you hate them it's entertaining to see how gorily dispatched they're going to be.

Your next film was *Pumpkinhead: Ashes to Ashes* (aka *Pumpkinhead 3*). This was an unusual departure for you: from independently funded films to an American made-for-TV franchise. How much creative control did you have?

I tend to generate my own projects. I develop a project and then try and get a producer interested in making it, so I've only done one job where I was a director for hire, *Pumpkinhead 3*, a made for cable TV film in the US. It was a Sci-Fi Channel (now Syfy) movie of the week, which went out over Halloween. I was offered that because we played *Evil Aliens* at the Toronto International Film Festival in the Midnight

Madness slot, and the woman from the Sci-Fi channel loved it but said, 'We can never show it on the Sci-Fi channel because it's got sex and drugs and extreme violence, but we really liked the way you directed it, and would like you to direct a film for us?'

That's how I got involved with *Pumpkinhead 3*. With that film I got paid better than my other film, but the script had to be in the seven-act structure that they use, it had to be planned around their ad-breaks. It was very strange and it wasn't the way I would choose to make a film; in terms of story, that was quite a compromise.

Was there a Sci-Fi Channel house-style that you had to stick to in terms of shooting?

They hired me because they liked my directorial vision. It was more the story, and the shooting schedule was insanely short, we only had 18 days to shoot it. It was shot on 35mm in Romania, with a big crew, mostly Romanian, and a lot of them didn't speak English. We had a lot of Romanian actors too, most of whom

had to be dubbed. They were very difficult to direct as they had poor English. On the plus side I got to work with Lance Henriksson who is a hero, so it was amazing working with him, and Doug Bradley from the *Hellraiser* films. It was crazy and it was too quick. To shoot a film in that amount of time just doesn't give you enough time to nail those action scenes, but I did it for the money. I went in knowing it was going to be different from how I'd worked before. It was interesting so I'm not ashamed of the film, but I don't see it as a fully 'Jake West movie'. I see it as being for somebody else.

I really liked the original *Pumpkinhead*. Stan Winston had already died by then, and the producer had bought the rights to do sequels and took it to the Sci-Fi channel. They also wanted me because I was British, and it was better for tax reasons for me to be in Romania! It's not really the best way to make a film, but that's how it happened. You were asking about creative control, and the truth of it is, the less money you have, you can have creative control, but you'll have less access to good actors because you can't afford them, for instance. So you're going to have less interest from a distributor, and all the rest of it, but it doesn't mean to say you can't make a good film, it just means it's harder because you haven't got the money to hire the crew, the cinematographer or art director you'd like to use, you can't afford them because they're working on something else, so that can affect your final movie. The amount of money you have can affect the quality of the movie, for sure. but it doesn't have to. You can make a great low budget movie but you have to work a lot harder to get it to happen.

Your next independently developed film was *Doghouse*. There is a huge jump in production values from *Evil Aliens*.

The big difference is because of the amount of money I had in the budget. *Doghouse* was the biggest budget of any film I've made. We had about £1.6 million, whereas *Evil Aliens* was made for £287,000. And that's the difference that having a budget makes: you can afford better actors, a better crew, you can shoot for longer, you can build sets, you can have better make-up effects. that's what money buys, it buys you a

slickness. But to get that money you have to have something which people will think is marketable, and we had to land those actors to get Sony on board to distribute. It comes from a different set of problems, basically.

I had become friends with the comic book creator Dan Schaefer. He wrote the comics *Dogwitch* and *The Scribbler*, which has just been made into a movie, which I developed with him for a while actually. He's known as a UK comic book creator and *Doghouse* was the first original script he wrote. Me and him have become friends and we developed that together. With that script I had something. Because of the success of *Shaun of the Dead* there was an appetite. Producers wanted that style of comedy-horror. Once I sent that script out to people they were very interested in wanting to make it. Once again, like the *Video Nasties* documentary, it's having the right thing at the right time. That made a difference. That was the easiest film to get money for. The script was instantly liked and we got producers interested straight away. It took them about nine months to get all the money signed off, but we had a commitment after I'd sent the script to one producer. So that was quite different!

Where do you stand on the gender and political interpretations of the film?

We feel that some critics understood the film - better critics like Kim Newman and Alan Jones, whereas some - ironically the tabloid critics like *The Sun*, who are very misogynistic in terms of their news and page three girls - they were the people who didn't understand. We were basically laughing at the misogynistic characters because the whole metaphor was that they are unreconstructed and they don't know how to deal with the women in their lives. So when they go away to get away from it all, because they're trying to prove to their mate that not all women are out to get him, they do so by taking him to a town of killer women. We were addressing the issues that these men don't understand their own sexuality, and how to deal with the relationships in their lives. We were basically laughing at the fact that when you have male bonding it tends to be very blokey. We had a choice; me and Dan really like zombie films, and in

a zombie film the standard thing is that there's been a solar flare, or a military infection or something like that. We went with the military infection but it would only affect one gender. When we did that we had a choice: a) it would affect men only and they become zombies, and how do women deal with it, or b) it affects women and how do the men deal with it? We decided to make it women as it would be funnier, as men don't know how to deal with women. Women know how to deal with men better than men know how to deal with women in real life. So we thought it would be funny to laugh at the *Nuts* magazine generation of men. If you look at television advertising now it's very misandric, the opposite of misogynistic. Females laughing at men, and men don't know how to behave any more. They're scared of their behaviour. So that's why we wanted to get someone like Danny Dyer to play a Jack the Lad character because that's how he comes across, because that's who is, but we were laughing at him because of his decisions as a male. It was designed to be a kind of black-humoured ironic look at the battle of the sexes, but also an enjoyable zombie film at the same time, but in a comic book form by a comic book writer.

Danny Dyer does have a persona that he takes from film to film.

I was nervous about working with Danny because people have a very strong reaction to him. People either like him or absolutely loathe him. He's a Marmite actor for sure! Before I was making the film and I said we'd got Danny Dyer in the film some people said, 'Well I won't watch that film then because I hate Danny Dyer and can't stand him and I won't watch it'. I was just trying to make a story and I was seeing him as a character that, well, he's a good pick if you want a misogynistic Jack the Lad character because as a person that's what he is.

Is that him in real life? These people who said they didn't want to watch it: are they making assumptions about him as a person, or because they've watched a Danny Dyer film?

There's good and bad films. Personally I really like *Severance*, it's a great fun horror film as well. I don't

particularly like *The Football Factory*, I'm not really into the hooligan films, they don't float my boat, but I did like the film he did in Spain, where he's a guy on the run (*The Business*, 2005) and when I met up with him I met him as an actor, a performer, and at the end of the day he has an image in the media, but he's a nice person when you talk to him as an actor and you're talking about things. He understood the script. The reason he wanted to do it is the bit where he gets tied up by the fat cannibal woman and he gets his fingers sawn off. He's being punished for his views and he understood that. He understood the subtext and thought it was funny. He thought it would be funny to use his image in that way, but obviously the danger is that the people who don't get it just think, 'Oh it's a Danny Dyer film'. I got to work with Noel Clark, Stephen Graham and Lee Ingleby: we had a really good cast and those actors understood the script.

It's risky when you do that battle of the sexes thing because you're always opening yourself up to some criticism. If people don't get it or react against it then it means that maybe you've touched a nerve. That's why horror films are good because in a sense horror films should upset or annoy people to some extent. We were trying to do something that was fun, and it's very much a case of whether people like that kind of style. I think the biggest problem was more that people felt we were trying to rip off *Shaun of the Dead* which wasn't our intention at all, it's just that it had been the most popular film of that type. It certainly created a market for the producers wanting that kind of movie, so I understand that criticism. It's the most successful British genre film to date, I guess. It's interesting that when you make a film, you don't start out from that place. If we had made it with a different actor to Danny Dyer it would have come across quite different. At one point we were trying to get Michael Fassbender for it! The producers didn't like him, this was before he was successful. He'd been in a TV series called *Hex* with Christina Cole, the girl who played Candy in the film. She was the lead so she knew Michael and he likes horror stuff - he did *Eden Lake* - but the producers didn't like him for it, and now you couldn't get him for love nor money!

How did Emily Booth feel about having a dialogue-free part?

She loved it! Because she comes from a TV presenter background she's not a trained actress. She loves horror and she's got into the horror world because of her enthusiasm for it. She really likes the make-up side of it, and having her head cast, prosthetics, something she really enjoyed. Whereas in *Evil Aliens* she was playing a TV presenter, her real-life persona, she was comfortable with that. In terms of giving her a bigger character with loads of dialogue she might be a lot more nervous, hence she's still in the TV presenting world, not the movies. She's great, Emily's always really up for it. She loves the horror side she's great fun to be around on set.

With all of the 'zom-birds', it started off like three to four hour makeup jobs. They got it down to two hours, and that's to get it on. The hard bit is you do a night's shooting, it takes an hour, hour and a half to get it off, so those makeup guys and people in makeup are there a lot longer, and it's quite fatiguing on the skin. It's quite a punishing thing to wear those face prosthetics, and we had full body paints, that's why you need actors who are up for it, who will approach it with the right spirit. Emily was great for that.

Do you feel with *Doghouse* that there is a lot more character depth than your previous films?

Doghouse is a much better written film in terms of characterisation, that's one of the reasons why it was great working with writers, you know, developing stuff with Dan who is an excellent writer. Over the years I've begun to learn the craft of writing a lot more. It's something that is hard work. The writing process is the hardest process, and not everyone is naturally a brilliant writer. When you're writing film scripts there are a lot of things you need to learn to get the structure right. I've learned a lot more about it, and I'd like to think I'm getting better at it. Some people might prefer *Evil Aliens* to *Doghouse*, so there's no right or wrong with something like that. If I make a hit film people might say, 'Finally there's a good script', or whatever. We'll see!

Intensive: You've talked about Nucleus Films, and as well as distributing your own films and DVD extras you're now distributing older films as well. How did that process start and how viable is that as a business model?

JW: I became friends with Marc Morris. He was working for Nigel Wingrove at Redemption Films. After I finished Film School at Farnham I had made my graduation film, which was a 27 minute gothic short. That's quite long for a short film. Like all my stuff, I've always slightly overreached a little bit! I've challenged myself, and that was a half-hour epic that I made for about £3000. It was shot on 16mm. That gave me the confidence to think I could do a feature. It was called *Club Death*, and was about the character of Death. It's an extra on the Anchor Bay release of *Razor Blade Smile*. I did that, and I wasn't sure whether you can sell a short film or not, so I contacted Redemption Films because they specialised in gothic stuff. I set up a meeting with Nigel and went in and he was considering doing a compilation of horror shorts. It would have been part of that package, but in the end that never happened. Through that I met Marc Morris, so we became friends. I suggested we set up our own company, and as a way of making money to finance our start-up, there was a big hunger for collector's editions DVDs and we could make the retrospectives and DVD extras. That was our business model to get the company financed, and then we used that money to start licensing cult films of our own, that we could afford, and then start making our own extras. That carried on to where we started making our own product, like the *Video Nasties* documentary. That went really well, but we've had a couple of difficult years recently because of the collapse of Pinnacle distribution. They went down about three or four years ago and we lost a lot of money in stock. That's when Woolworths went bust. That caused chaos in the home entertainment industry, but we survived that and got a new distribution deal, but recently we've had a major setback with HMV having trouble. It's been difficult, and physical media, DVD sales, are going down and we haven't quite worked out whether we can make money with streaming. It's a new area.

How long we can survive in our current form we don't know. We're producing stuff and still making extras as well. We just did some stuff for *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2* blu-ray release and the Roger Corman *Fall of the House of Usher*, so we're still doing that extras work but there's less of it around because so many of those films have been released now. And we're looking for interesting films of our own to do. It's a tough market, but it's been good to supplement my income. It's given me another way to earn some money and is connected to film. It's a nice way of working and I get on very well with Marc. It's something we both enjoy doing. Hopefully we can carry on.

You have distributed some fairly obscure sex-ploitation, including Donovan Winter's *Some Like It Sexy*.

Those Donovan Winter films are interesting. Marc

had known Donovan for some time, and we thought those strange British sex comedies, they're quite depressing as well! They're real time capsules of what England was like, and people forget that sometimes. Anything that interests us, and we think it should be seen again, it's nice to get it released. We think there's a few years left in physical media, but it's definitely getting harder and harder. Amazon sales are one of our best things, but it's not the same when you had a lot of shops as well. The market is getting smaller. And prices are going down, and piracy does affect you when you're a small company.

What do you think of the recent distribution experiment with Ben Wheatley's *A Field in England*?

I think it was a very interesting strategy, and in a sense it is more interesting that they decided to put it in cinemas when they premiered it on Film 4. It's interesting to see whether people would go and pay



Danny Dyer in *Doghouse*.

at the cinema, and I do believe they did. I think they made around £30,000 at the cinema, which shows that there is an audience willing to still go to the cinema if they like a director. But obviously we're not talking about a blockbuster here, we're talking about a small artistic experimental film. I know Ben and really respect him for what he is doing. I'm not sure if when they made that film they knew they were going to take that strategy. I think the film fell between two stalls because it was very arty.

You recently directed a segment of *The ABCs of Death*, a film which was experimental not only in its structure but also in its release strategy.

The ABCs of Death has done really well on (VOD) Video on Demand, which they did first and then released it in cinemas. That seems to be a different model for lower budget films, and the cinema seems to be becoming more and more only for high end American films. It's hard to get independent film in cinemas. If you can release something simultaneously it means piracy is going to be less of a problem, so I think we're going to see more and more of this.

When they gave you the brief was there going to be a connecting story or was it always going to be a straightforward compilation?

There was never any idea of it being other than an A to Z. One of the thing that interested me was that it was an experimental anthology in a sense because each director was being given a letter and we were given free rein to do what we wanted to. There had to be a death using the letter. To me it seemed like an interesting format. I like some anthology films but normally they don't really work, they're always going to be uneven, and certainly with *The ABCs of Death* it's an experimental thing, and it was kind of obvious that with twenty-six stories it was going to be very varying degrees of whether you like certain ones, or the styles. It was an interesting project to get involved with as it was different directors from around the world. Thirteen different countries, and I knew a number of them because I've met them on the festival circuit. It was much less of a time commitment than trying to get a feature done.

Did they approach you and give you the letter or did that come later?

I was in Cannes at the time in 2011 and one of the producers of the film runs both the Drafthouse and Fantastic Fest in Austin Texas: Tim League, he's the brains behind it. He had screened my film *Doghouse* at their festival and it had gone down well. We got on. A lot of the directors were Fantastic Fest vets basically, so that's how I got asked to do it. We went to a meeting in Cannes and he pitched it, and I said that's the kind of thing I'd like to get involved with. We got asked to submit what our favourite letter would be if we could get it, and we did. Because I was brought on quite early I got the letter I wanted. Some people might have been disappointed that some of the letters were gone, but I got the letter S which was what I wanted to do.

Was that because you already had that particular story in mind?

I had an idea of what I would like to do. Like all these things, you're never completely certain until you write the script and you see that it works on the page. Because it had to be four minutes or less you've got a very short of time to tell a narrative. We had a very low budget, we had \$5000, which is really nothing. One reason I did it was because I wanted to have some fun and go and shoot stuff more the way I used to. I shot it much more like I would have done back at the days at college. I shot it myself, I DP'd it. We went out to the States and shot it in the Nevada desert. Most of the budget was used on flights! One of the reasons I did it was that I thought I could get a lot of production value by shooting it out in the desert. It's such a striking area. I've got some friends who live out in LA and I knew the guy who owned the classic car. I knew people in the film industry, like the guy who did the flamethrower effects. The other person I took was my stuntman from the UK. We set him on fire for real, which was the most dangerous thing we did. We did have a medic on standby. We had fire safety people. Doing that on a low budget is quite hard, you shouldn't do that kind of thing, it's only because I'm friends with my stunt coordinator who specialises in body burns, so I could talk him into it.

We had fire gel, which is actually a coolant. He covers his whole skin in it, then he covers two layers of clothing, then a fire suit, then a protective helmet and breathing gear, glass goggles, it's a full rig, it's a proper movie.

Were they surprised that a British director sent them a film shot in Nevada?

JW: They wanted us to send a brief synopsis of what we were doing just in case somebody else was doing something else exactly the same, so that was fine. No, the cool thing about these producers was that they really wanted the directors to bring what was interesting to them to the table, which you don't normally get in that sense. Because we had so little money we did have complete creative freedom, which was great. They were really chuffed that I did that out in the desert because it gave a very different look from a lot of the other films. One of the reasons I wanted to do it was actually because, being a British director, I didn't know how the films were going to be presented. We didn't know that each director was going to be credited at the end of the film. I thought it would be more interesting if you didn't know who directed each segment until the end credits, personally. I wanted to trick people into thinking I was an American director doing it! I was also taking the piss out of American films a little bit. I was using addiction as a metaphor for film. We are addicted to film, and as an audience we are addicted to American cinema.

The bedsit was filmed in a garage with three lights. Very low tech. That was out in Malibu! We wanted to make it look horrendous as possible. It was quite close to a real junkie den.

It was a nice challenge to go back and do a short film because I haven't done a film like that for a long time. And the way I shot it was a chance for me to test out these new lightweight Canon cameras and shoot something myself. I had three cameras: a 5D MkII, a 600D and a 550D. I also had a Go Pro Hero 2.

These HD DSLR cameras have enabled a democratisation of filmmaking.

It's amazing. It was funny looking back at my VHS stuff. It looks pretty crap! For kids making films today they are movie quality, and you can edit them on your computer. The kit is incredible. It's a great time to be a filmmaker. One thing they lack however is that you had to be very driven to get anything done because it was hard.

You have produced and distributed your own feature-length documentary as well on the video nasties censorship of the 1980s. That must have been a difficult project to put together.

It took us over a year to do the *Video Nasties* documentary. It took a long time to track down the right people to interview. One of the problems with documentary films - as I've found out doing behind the scenes and documentaries for a lot of DVDs, and the video nasties thing was bigger - is you have so much footage. When you do a feature you have less footage than when you do a documentary. When you do a doc you leave the camera running and you've just got hours and hours. By the time you've interviewed twenty or thirty people you've just got an insane amount of footage to go through. To cut it down and get it into a narrative structure is quite a challenge and it did take a long time, but the good thing about that is that I run Nucleus Films with my partner Marc Morris. We didn't have any time pressure on us to get it released. It was something we could do and get right. With a documentary you never know exactly when you want to stop.

We're working on a follow-up at the moment. *Video Nasties: Vol. 2* [editor's note - *Video Nasties: Draconian Days* was released 1st March 2014]. There was a supplementary list that the BBFC had called the Section 3 List. There were 80 other movies that were taken off the shelves but were never prosecuted. That's why there's been some confusion about whether certain films were nasties: stuff like *Xtro* and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* for instance. They were never prosecuted but they were removed from video stores. We're doing a similar format, and the documentary is going to carry on talking about how censorship changed and evolved post the 1985 Video Recordings Act. The VRA had not been signed off properly in parliament

so it had to be revalidated. It turned out that what they were doing wasn't legal. A lot of people were prosecuted that shouldn't be. It was not a legal act. It is incredibly ironic considering what a farce the whole thing was in the first place.

Sometimes you just get a bit lucky, but the first *Video Nasties* documentary did get people talking again. We got the timing luckily right because when we put it out there had been a wave of the BBFC getting flustered over certain films: *A Serbian Film*, *Human Centipede 2*, a number of movies. It seemed to be quite prescient. Sometimes you just catch the zeitgeist. There have been a number of other documentaries in a similar vein like *Rewind This!*, an American version of what we did, about the VHS era. We were first, and it was a period of history that we lived through and it kind of concerned us. It was something that we still felt quite deeply about and was worth talking about. It did seem to be a bit of British film history that had been ignored.

Do you think people in 20 years time will have a nostalgia for the shocking films of today, like *A Serbian Film* or *Human Centipede 2*?

I get the feeling, probably not, although it's hard to say. One of the reasons we have a lot of nostalgia for these movies is because being children of the 1980s we became avid collectors. The fact that it took years to track these films down gave them a sheen, a mystique. If it took you a few years to track down a movie and then you'd finally see it on a 10th generation VHS tape that was a big moment in your life. You'd been building up to it, and there were fanzines. Because of the internet everything is so instant. If some kid hears that *Human Centipede 2* has been cut or banned in the UK they can just download it from the internet a minute later. The actual sourcing, there's no difficulty to it anymore, and I think that's changed the value of them to some extent. Kids are not into collecting as fervently as our generation is. Physical media is dying, everything is becoming online, the value of these is changing I think. I don't think it will be as nostalgic, but I could be wrong! It's hard to say. I think people are always nostalgic over their own adolescence and childhood!

I think teenagers now will in twenty years time be feeling nostalgic for cat videos on YouTube.

Exactly, because that's what they are into now. There doesn't seem to be quite as big a passion for movies as there was when I was younger. It's just another thing that people think are cool, but there are so many other things you can be interested in now. The internet has really changed how people communicate as well and I think that has affected people's concentration to some extent.

Do you have another feature in the pipeline?

I do. I've been working for nearly two years on a film called *Spitfire*, with a script by Dan Schaeffer. It has a genre feel but it's not a horror film. If I had to describe it I'd say it was somewhere between *Pulp Fiction* and *Trainspotting*. A modern day crime-caper set in London, and it's got some very interesting characters, bizarre scenarios and a fractured narrative. It's exciting to me because I wanted to do something that would find me a wider audience and show that I've matured as a director, and can do something with a slightly bigger narrative.

Jake West Filmography

Razor Blade Smile (1998)

Evil Aliens (2005)

Pumpkinhead: Ashes to Ashes (2006)

Doghouse (2009)

Video Nasties: Moral Panic, Censorship and Videotape (2010)

The ABCs of Death (2012, segment 'S is for Speed')

Video Nasties: Draconian Days (2014)