

UGO.com Film/TV - The Attic Expeditions, Jeremy Kasten Interview

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DE: It's an unusual name; I mean, it is not a traditional horror film. Were there other titles that were bounced around?

JK: You know, not so much. We like that it was kind of a literate title, literary sounding, and that it was different, and that it goes in A, which is always good at the video store. In fact, one of the deals with the foreign distributor was that they couldn't change the name without getting our permission. Because I was scared that it was going to get called something really stupid, and then, of course

DE: *Brain Openers*, or something

JK: Yeah, exactly, right, and of course they did change the name, and gave it just the worst title in the world, and you know, whatever. It could have been so much worse, but still, in all

DE: What did they change it to?

JK: *Horror in the Attic*.

DE: Oh, that's not so bad

JK: Yeah, I know but it's like calling an action movie *Explosions in the Street*. Yeah, horror in the attic happens, but it doesn't really tell you anything about the movie.

DE: Did you write any of it? Or re-write any of it?



JK: The deal was that Rogan wrote the first draft, and he and I fucked around with other subsequent drafting. Because he was in Mississippi, we were writing a lot of it over the phone. So sometimes, we would just cover broad concepts, and the he'd go back and do it, and sometimes I'd take a pass at dialogue. A lot of the character names and stuff like that, we came up with together in the re-writes, but really, I have to say because so many of the germs, the cool ideas came from him, it really is his script, his sickness.

DE: You started shooting in 1997. Why did it take so long to come out?

JK: It took forever just to get it shot. We were raising money and shooting and raising money on and off. We shot for 18 days in 1997 with like less than what people spend on a year college education. For the first 18 days, we shot at the House of Love, and then we ran out of money before we even shot Jeffrey or any exteriors or anything, just stuff at the house. We hadn't shot the attic yet, so we raised money, and a year later, went and shot a couple more scenes and then raised money, and we just kept doing that until the movie was the movie. And a lot of people said along the way, "Why don't you just try and make a movie out of what you have? It's so weird anyway, can't you just try and make it make sense?" But it seemed like it was going to need all the pieces, and actually, we ended up overshooting.

DE: You shot in a pretty famous house in LA. It seems a lot of movies were shot there.

JK: Yeah. How did you know that?

DE: I know a lot of things.

JK: Yeah, I guess so.

DE: [laughs] What was that house all about?

JK: It's kind of cool, because across the street is the house from *The People Under the Stairs* [directed by Wes Craven]. So it's pretty cool to have your morning coffee with Wendy Robie looking out on the *People Under the Stairs* house. It's a lot of three houses; there is this really nice sort of crazy guy who owns all three houses, all three properties.

DE: They're not like movie-studio houses?

JK: No, it's in South Central LA. It's this family, and this very sort of crazy man owns and does the "maintenance" on these houses, but they are dilapidated and falling apart. The one we shot in, I think, is the oldest, and it had been in a fire in about 1922, and it had gutted most of the house, but he put in some walls and stuff. But big portions of the back of the house have fallen down. And it was really amazing, because we had lived there. Andras, who plays Trevor, the producers, and myself, we kind of moved into the House of Love because it's a half-hour drive between Hollywood and there, so it just became not worth driving. So we'd sleep in the bedrooms, like on a hot set, like roll out of bed and brush our teeth, get your coffee, change clothes and walk into the same room you were just sleeping in and light it to shoot, it was very surreal. And actually, the house next door, which is where we shot the game room because it's the biggest room in any of the houses, the biggest single room, is now a halfway house for crazy people, because he had to rent it out. Yeah, there's a lot of history of a lot of low budget, in-between budget movies there.

DE: Was it necessary to have so much nudity in it?

JK: No. The movies I grew up on, during that initial video boom where you could go and find Herschell Gordon Lewis movies taking up a whole shelf at a video store, when that went down, it seem like there was a lot more nudity. There were these amazing - I saw my first French vampire lesbian movie when I was 13, just by randomly renting it. I think it speaks a lot to, not to sound pretentious or anything, but it is weird how uptight the world of film and our society in general has become about nudity. I think it's specifically an American thing, because I think in Europe, they still have movies where people get naked. We just act like it's a big deal here. And I don't think it's necessarily even to be exploitative; I just think movies are supposed to show you things that are more exciting than what you see in real life, and [laughs] seeing naked people is often exciting.



DE: [laughs] Just once in a while, right? Any good set stories, like between Jeffrey Combs and Ted Raimi?

JK: Yeah, you know what, they had a really good time working together, and we rehearsed a little bit, we got together and ran through their scenes, and they are both really just amazingly cool guys. They're actually guys you would want to hang out at a party with, and I don't mean just chatting about movies. I mean just chatting. They enjoyed their roles in the movies. They understood that the humor inherent to making a mind-fuck movie. More than anything, I think they enjoyed playing off each other. I think that every director would like to take credit for the ways that things go down. But managing the accidents, I think as Hitchcock said, really sometimes is more what it is. There is a scene where they are yelling at each other where they are actually yelling and talking over each other, and they totally came up with that, and we are really into the idea of having their dialogue kind of step on each other and play it out that way, and it worked so well in the movie, I'm really pleased with that.

DE: Must have been a lot of fun to direct Jeffrey Combs and Ted Raimi.

JK: A dream come true.

DE: Especially together.

JK: Totally! An absolute dream come true. You just knew the first time you had a camera on the two of them, this is kind of horror history right here. I'm working in the genre that I grew up on, and I'm making history, because it's the two of them in the same frame interacting, it was great.

DE: Yeah, must have been neat. And there were a lot of long shots, with not a lot of coverage. They must have been pretty tough.

JK: Because my background is as an editor, I knew in a lot of ways that the rhythm and speed at which I wanted to hear the dialogue. A lot of times, when you shoot a scene, the actors tend to give you a very slow read, and then you spend most of your time in the editing room just trying to find a rhythm to the dialogue. I was able to push the actors into a rhythm using a metronome to give them the rhythm of the scene. That whole scene with Seth in the game room, that all one shot scene, we rehearsed with a metronome, with me slowly turning it up so that I knew that he was in the rhythm of the waltz, and that it was going to get faster and faster. In some ways, it makes it incredibly difficult, because you have to light a whole room, and that's a big pain in the ass, but it gives you a lot of freedom with the performances. Hopefully, it gives you better performances when you're on such a tight schedule, because there was no time or money to get coverage.



DE: Originally, Keith Coogan was supposed to be in it. How did you end up with Seth Green?

JK: Yeah Keith was a buddy of my roommate who was a grip on the movie. And we went to Keith because we were so excited that there was a movie star who was willing to be in the movie. Keith and I met and I was really, really excited about him playing Douglas, but he had to drop out, because we weren't paying him, and he got a paying gig. And Keith is a great guy and I would have loved to have worked with him, but as it turned out Seth was a godsend for us both, because he

was truly made for that role, I don't know that anybody ever could have said those words as well as Seth could have. With his amazing Jeff Goldblum impersonation going on in that role. And also, obviously, right about the same time, *Austin Powers* just came out right before we started shooting, so his resurgence into Hollywood was just happening. He got *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* shortly thereafter, and then it all fell into place. I think, in a lot of ways, it made it possible for us to get that movie done. Because even though we still had to finance it in bits and pieces a little bit at a time, and no studio or anything ever stepped up and paid for us to finish the movie.

DE: This movie will obviously make money, just because it has Jeffrey Combs and Seth Green in it. I don't understand what the problem was.

JK: People are idiots, and there is such a lack of understanding of genre and of the fans, and it's a weird movie. I mean, admittedly, this is not a slasher film. This isn't even *Blair Witch*. It's a strange film, nobody involved with the movie comes from money and nobody went to law school. So we were just struggling just like we did at the beginning all the way through to the end practically. Does that answer that?

DE: Yeah, absolutely. I didn't realize this, but it is being released by Blockbuster's label?

JK: Blockbuster is actually the distributor. They have stepped into the fray of distribution now, and you don't know, I'm sure people will in the next couple of years become savvy, but there are movies out on the shelves that are Blockbuster movies, but they have some other name on it. It's not like it says Blockbuster on it.

DE: I went to my good video store because I assumed it would be there, but it wasn't, but it was at Blockbuster, so I was a little surprised by it.

JK: No it's being sold to the mom and pops, but whether they're going to pick it up or whether it's going to take a little while remains to be seen. I know that Hollywood Video is carrying it, or West Coast Video. Some of them are carrying it, and some of the mom and pops have it.

DE: And Blockbuster understands that having those three guys on the cover will make people rent it. Right?

JK: To some extent. I think, in some ways, their formula is really a smart one, because they are putting movies out there that are their movies that are competing with these studio films. Seth Green is in big movies, but he is not Tom Cruise, and neither is Jeffrey Combs, and this is the first movie that they have released where they have, like, 8 copies on the shelf in some stores. I don't think that the public at large is that easily duped. Frankly, I think people know what direct-to-video is, and what movies came out, so when you have 8 copies of something sitting next to a movie where there is one copy that was out in theaters for a month, I don't know that it will help the movie. In some ways, I think it might hinder it. But you know, it's my movie, and it's my job to feel strangely defensive about whatever they do with the marketing of it. Which is nothing, and that is probably why studios spend millions of dollars to market movies before they come out: So people know what they are.

DE: Great soundtrack. John Zorn, Dillenger Escape Plan. How did that happen?

JK: We had an awesome music supervisor who had a good ear and just knew what I was looking for. John Zorn's music, I have always wanted to use in a movie. A friend introduced that particular track to me when I was looking for music for a short film in college, and then it was in *Funny Games*. And I was like, oh my god, somebody used that, but he was cool, he let us use it; his one stipulation was that it not be edited at all. And actually, with the rock and roll, I never wanted rock or anything other than symphonic music on this movie. I always thought it would be wonky, and I tried it because I thought it was important to the sale of the movie, that there be soundtrack potential. That's the buzzword in the last 5 years in selling your movie. And I feel like it does work, luckily, although it would have been a slightly different movie without it. But I don't think it actually killed the movie, which is what I was scared of.



DE: How did you find Andras Jones? He was really good.

JK: I'm glad you think so. Andras was sort of an upcoming Johnny Depp type for a while there, and left Hollywood in a frustrated angry mess and moved to Seattle to pursue his career as a musician, which is what he'd been doing for several years. He flies back to do movie parts and stuff. The casting director thought of him, Andras read it, and immediately got all these amazing references to literature and things that you just wouldn't think an actor was going to start emailing

level, and started making it really clear in emailing me about it. He flew himself into town to actually audition, so that's how that went down.

DE: That's pretty impressive.

JK: I was very impressed, needless to say.

DE: I see that you assisted William Friedkin on a television movie.

JK: I did, yeah. They did these drive-in classics for HBO about 8 years ago, which Debra Hill and Lou Arkoff produced, so it was a cool thing to be involved in. And to be William Friedkin's personal assistant, I held his glycerin pills in my pocket while he was on the set, got him tea, picked him up at home every day, and brought him to the set.

DE: You didn't annoy him by asking him about his movies too much?

JK: I tried to be pretty respectful. I told him what a huge fan I was, but I tried not to dig too much. I

think I'd wait for him to mention something and then I'd ask him about it.

DE: Because he's a psycho, isn't he?

JK: He has a reputation as being a psycho, and I saw him fire people at a moment's notice and freak out. But he was really cool to me for whatever reason; I was just under the radar enough with him. Obviously, you spend 3 weeks with a guy like that, and some pretty amazing things, cool stories and fascinating things happen. One time, I was in the car with him, driving him to work, and Howard Stern was on, and they did some kind of send up of the *Exorcist* on the air, like they were doing the barfing and the fuck me and everything, totally making fun of *The Exorcist*. And I was sitting there with Friedkin just driving on the freeway, and like my shoulder is tensing up, thinking, "My god, the man who made that movie, the man who created the mythology that everybody knows, but those words and everything, is sitting next to me right now. What are the chances?" And he didn't even bat an eye. And I'm thinking should I say something. Should I acknowledge it? And he was just looking out the window as though nothing was happening. It was the strangest thing; I'll never forget that.

DE: That is pretty surreal.

JK: That's actually classic him, it seemed to me, from the little bit I know him, that he would go out of his way to do the thing that you were least expecting from him at given moment.

DE: Do you have a funny set story from *Attic Expeditions*?

JK: Seth spent most of the time on the set of the movie kind of punch drunk, because we were just so exhausted. They were such long days, and like I said, we were all just living together at that house, so it was more like summer camp, and he had this pirate character that he did, so the whole time on the set, [in a pirate voice] "Arr, me matey, time to do my close-up," and stuff like that. And a guy came from Finland to do a documentary on the movie, or I should say on American independent film, and showed up on the set with his video camera, and was there every day.

Just to sidetrack a little bit: In the end, we spent about a year trying to track this guy down to get his footage, which most of which, he taped over, because he disappeared and we never got the footage from him. But Seth and I spent a lot of time on the set, in between set-ups, just torturing this guy, so he was there trying to make this serious documentary, and we would sort of pull him aside and talk about how drunk we were, or right to his camera, just to make sure he wasn't getting anything too serious, or too good.

DE: And you're wondering why you couldn't find him.

JK: Yeah, exactly, that's right. I'm sure he was hiding.

DE: Is that what you ended up using for a lot of the behind the scenes stuff on the DVD?

JK: That's the only reason we had any of the behind the scenes stuff from the House of Love.

DE: That's pretty impressive, to have behind the scenes stuff on a small movie like this. You know, people don't have it.

JK: My day job is doing behind the scenes documentaries for studio films, I edit them for HBO and DVDs and stuff. So, it's pretty important to me to be able to have some representation of our work on there. Would have like to have had more from the House of Love, but like I said, in the end, it turned out, when we finally tracked that guy down, most of his footage had been dumped. He just taped over it.

DE: You edit quite a number of films like *The Specials*, which was written James Gunn. Have you heard from him since he wrote *Scooby Doo*?

JK: I did edit *The Specials*. I have not heard from James Gunn. Actually, he and I barely met. He wrote that movie, and but I mostly dealt with the director. I met him, I think, at the premier for the first time, because the director, I don't think, wanted James involved in the editing of the movie at all.

DE: That's strange.

JK: Yeah I know, right, especially because he was in it. He had a huge role.

DE: What were your favorite horror films growing up?

JK: Well, I think I wear my [Dario] Argento influence on my sleeve. I think he has been a huge influence in so many ways. Giallo movement in general, the ability to make a movie where you are not necessarily that concerned with story and character. Not that *Attic* has any concerns in that regard.

DE: I've seen plenty of Giallo; they usually don't make any sense.

JK: Yeah, exactly. It's just a fuckin' scary movie, like a nightmare. I really appreciated that growing up, because I didn't have a real awareness of that. You know the standards, obviously Friedkin and *The Exorcist* was a huge influence, and Tobe Hooper's *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, as well as *Poltergeist*, is a phenomenal movie.

DE: You've obviously seen tons of cheesy horror movies during the video boom. You must have seen everything, right?

JK: Yeah, when I was 12, there was so much more on video. You walk into a video store now, and you can't find Herschell Gordon Lewis unless you go to a video store that is catering to intellectual college students. And back in those days, there was just a ton of crap out there that was great crap. I feasted on that stuff regularly.

DE: Are you going to be able to do another feature soon?

JK: God, I hope so. We're trying. You know, I always thought that if I just manage to make that first movie, however long it takes, if it comes out, then you're just out there in the world and you go, hey, I got a movie going, and now I'm ready to make another one. Hollywood would just say, "Welcome, what do you want to do next?" [Laughs]. But it apparently doesn't work that way at all. Not that I was ignorant, but you hope that it's going to be a little easier. So far, it hasn't been necessarily easier. I think once we get further along, it opens up some doors, but again, it's not like the movie we made was *Blair Witch* and it was a Zeitgeist movie that came out everywhere.

The guy editing across the hall from me is another horror director, and you start to figure out that there really is this stigma against genre that, even with the reinvigoration of horror films in the last 10 years, it's still hard, because you're dealing with an industry where the people who run it have no respect for it. They don't regard genre movies as something valuable. They regard it as something for the kids that makes money.

DE: Is it renting well? Do you get numbers like that?

JK: It is. We've been really pleased with it. It's crazy. It's out there in every Blockbuster store across the country, and some of them have, like, 8-10 copies out there at eye level on a shelf. I think the video store is the new drive-in, in the sense that it is the great equalizer in a lot of ways. A movie this small, to be available right alongside hundred million dollar movies; it's outrageous. I think they're thrilled. I certainly am.

DE: Jeremy, fantastic. Thanks.

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