

How to shoot a scary movie: William M. Miller on *Headspace*

When William M. Miller agreed to shoot a supernatural thriller for director Andrew van den Houten titled **Headspace**, the Cinematographer was interested in shooting a story in the horror genre filled with many layers. Despite the movie's indie status, the filmmakers managed to keep the scope of the film large despite its low budget. A stellar cast of horror icons like Udo Kier, Olivia Hussey and Dee Wallace-Stone was enlisted. "Even though the film is low budget, it seems quite epic. Every dream actor that we approached accepted. We pulled in every favor we could get and people were receptive. We also have so many locations and that made the film seem a lot bigger than it is," he notes.

Headspace tells the story of Alex

Borden (played by Christopher Denham) who finds his intelligence growing as his grip on reality loosens. Suppressed memories begin to emerge from Alex's dark past involving the murder of his mother, abandonment by his father and a missing older brother. Miller had to decipher a way to translate to the viewer Alex's reality along with flashbacks and psychic visions.

"There are flashbacks, 'vision flashes' and present day," he explains. "Vision flashes are when he sees something that will happen in the future - it's more a fisheye world and they are quick glimpses. When he reminisces about his childhood, that is more a sepia, warmer look. At first, the images are happy and warm; but they always end up in a disaster that snaps him into the present day which is shot pretty normal but very contrasty and moody."

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Miller shot all interiors with Kodak VISION2 200T 7217 film rated at 160 ASA to decrease grain and make it more saturated for the best blow-up to 35mm possible. Daytime exteriors were shot on Kodak VISION2 100T 7212 film, pulled one stop to decrease contrast. Using the VISION2 500T 7218 film, Miller managed to capture ominous night exteriors without large, additional lighting units. "Most people light the background up, but I let the background go because the Vision stock would actually read into it," he says. "I shot the night exteriors wide open at T1.3 which allowed streetlights, car lights and

porch lights in the distance to be visible because I would balance to those light levels. Since I can't send my team out to put up lights, it's like getting free light."

Even with a small budget, the Director and DP never considered shooting with anything but celluloid. "Shooting on digital video wasn't even a consideration. It was more a matter of, 'Do we shoot Super 16 or 35mm?' If we shot on 35mm, we'd have to shoot a lot less or we could shoot Super 16 and get lots of coverage. Andrew loved that. We have a lot of different camera angles



and movement. Our budget was small but we managed to infuse the film with a lot of Steadicam, dolly shots and even six days of crane shots. You rarely see that on an independent film," he says.

For Miller, shooting a film in his favorite genre was a dream come true. He says, "For a Cinematographer, lighting-wise everything is so interesting with the churches, basements of hospitals and corridors we shoot. It's a fun challenge to create a dark and eerie atmosphere. We wanted to stay true to the classic early horror films. All the lighting, blood, special makeup and camera moves were done on-location, in-camera. Nothing was added in post-production. The shadows we created are real shadows. It took more time, but I think in the end it looks better because it's actually real and it's there." ■

Right: (L to R) Actress Dee Wallace-Stone and Director/Producer Andrew van den Houten, on the set of *Headspace* shot by DP William M. Miller.

Below: Actor Larry Fessenden on location in Connecticut for *Headspace*.

