

Behind the Mask

mixes documentary and horror film looks

Contemporary filmmaking has a growing library of projects in which the contrasting looks of film and video are interspersed for dramatic effect. In *Behind the Mask: The Rise of Leslie Vernon*, a documentary film crew stumbles into a real, live horror movie.

"It was one of the best scripts I'd read in a long time," says cinematographer Jaron Presant. "The film is set in a world where the slasher killers of horror movies really exist. As the film opens, a documentary crew follows a man who claims that he is the next horror legend. Then he begins to really kill people, and the story continues as an '80s style horror film, which is told on film."

Written by David Stieve and director Scott Glosserman, the first part of *Behind the Mask* was shot on digital video using a Panasonic camera. Presant purposely shot an uncontrolled look; mismatched color temperatures abound and the camera is shakily handheld.

The transition to film takes place when the documentary crew goes to the library. The killer is about to murder the first victim. Robert Englund (who played Freddy Krueger in the *Nightmare on Elm Street* series) shows up as the film's "Ahab" — the wizened embodiment of good showing up to fight evil.

The documentary crew follows a character running up the steps and into the library, with all the usual problems of night-time video clearly evident. Then as the character enters the building, the

music swells, the perspective cuts to a camera position inside the library, and suddenly the story is being told on film. The horror movie has begun.

"There's a big shift in camerawork and lighting," Presant says. "First, you go from this erratic, handheld look to a big, sweeping crane shot." The colors shift dramatically too. Rather than the stark, institutional lighting that seemed evident on video, the film picks up the warmth of practical sources and the mystery of dark corners.

"There's much more color and tonal information," Presant says. "The warmth of the lights, the tonality of people's skin, is so different, so much more pleasing to the eye."

But Presant's approach was a very classic style. The horror movie part of *Behind the Mask* had to look like the 1970s and '80s-era slasher movies to which it was visually alluding. "We spent a lot of time studying those movies and

working to match that style. So there's often very source-driven lighting. These were low-budget pictures without a lot of money or time. In matching that style, we had to light minimally, which was actually fortunate given the film's budget."

In fact, because *Behind the Mask* was shot on a very tight budget, Presant actually downsized the crew for the video portion of the shoot. The video half of the project took about two weeks to shoot, while the film half was completed in six days.

He shot most of the film section with an Aaton XTRprod camera, a Canon 8-64mm zoom and a selection of Zeiss

primes, in a 1.85:1 aspect ratio on Kodak VISION2 500T 7218 film. Presant says it was clearly the best film for the job.

"The 7218 has such fine grain that it's a really good choice for originating on Super 16 that is headed for theatrical release. We were doing a lot of night shots, so we also needed the speed. The film has an impressive combination of speed and quality."

He essentially avoided filters and diffusion. "Since we were shooting Super 16mm, we were already going to get some softening, I didn't want to risk softening it any further."

Even with the minimal lighting, he says the film produced great shots. "Some of the night exteriors, where we were trying to simulate moonlight, were done with a single light source, anywhere from three quarters back to full silhouette. To my eye that was some of the best footage we shot."

After photography was complete, everything went to Post Logic Studios in Los Angeles for a digital intermediate and eventual output to 35mm Kodak Vision Premier print film. "It struck me that Super 16mm has new life in a digital intermediate environment," Presant says. "You no longer have this huge increase in grain when you output to 35. You can even intercut original 35 and Super 16mm without a major problem." ■

Above: Actor Nathan Baesel in a scene from *Behind the Mask*, shot by DP Jaron Presant.

Inset: (Behind camera) Jaron Presant with cast and crew on the set.

