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Features

Quality Time With Hilliard Guess, An Interview

By Tommy Garrett

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HOLLYWOOD—Actor, writer, director and filmmaker Hilliard Guess recently told me about an exciting new project he has created. It is a horror script titled, "30 Miles From Nowhere," and recently became the Grand Prize winner at Screenplay Festival under the Thriller/Horror category. I caught up with the award-winning actor and writer this week.

Q-What is your award-winning screenplay about?

A-"30 Miles From Nowhere" is a horror/action script about a ferocious beast who hunts a group of stranded strangers in the middle of nowhere. You know, one of the classic genre films where it's every person for themselves in order to survive the most terrifying night of their lives! I love to see a good monster or serial killer in a film. But the ones that stand out are the ones where it is about the characters in the story that are weak and become strong or strong and become weak. It's not always about the monster so much; they're more of the B-story. They are still the main opponent, but I personally like my characters to battle among themselves until there is a sole survivor. That person usually has an ability they didn't realize they always had, which will help them kill the beast, demon, or killer, or at least forces the characters to gain the strength or knowledge to escape. The audience is left on edge that something is still lurking in the abandoned tavern, on the side of the road... or in the dark."

Q-What made you delve into this horror genre after doing such a groundbreaking emotional short film that starred "Dynasty's" Gordon Thomson?

A-"Good question, Tommy. I loved making my short, dramatic film, 'Troublesome.' I had a blast writing, directing and producing it in 2010. I was so lucky to work with a great cast, including Golden Globe Nominee Gordon Thomson and multi-talented Kareem Grimes. I had a wonderful team every step of the way, from my DP John Savedra to my producers, Edwin Benton II, Kathryn J. Taylor and Michael Coscia. I guess, like most screenwriters out there grinding away on spec scripts, whether it's TV, Film, Shorts or Web series, I consider myself a writer who can write other genres. Not to mention, I grew up on horror films because my mother is the biggest spooky film buff of them all. It's truly one of the bonds all of my siblings share to this day, we're all huge horror fans. I especially am drawn to character driven, smart horror films like, 'Night of the Living Dead,' '30 Days of Night,' 'Jaws,' 'Feast,' 'Paranormal Activity' and 'Saw.' Those films are about great characters trapped in the midst of something beyond their power that's hunting them or about someone super clever who's trying to kill them or better yet, force them to kill themselves. The first script I ever sold and produced was in 2004 to a small company called Vivamorem Entertainment. It was a horror/thriller script called 'Blackout,' which I co-wrote and co-produced. I go through spurts where all I watch are horror films and I mean... any film that gets my attention. I just happened to be in one of those spurts about a year or so ago when I came across a thriller synopsis I'd written a few years before and thought, what if? So '30 Miles From Nowhere' was just one of many ideas that I had in my files that I was burning to write."

Q-What was your motivation for the great story?



A-"The story comes from a love of my favorite classical horror format, which is; one location, very few characters and an unstoppable force or thing on the hunt for blood. Over the years when I studied popular horror films, for the most part, they always had these elements. Then again, when writing this particular script, I used what writing guru Blake Snyder called 'the monster in the house' genre. Basically, he meant, and I quote, 'Don't... get... eaten.' We've all seen films using this genre, but clever writing and great characters separate a great story from the rest and audiences never get tired of paying top dollar to see them. So for me, this genre is very challenging to write because they are contained with limited locations and characters and interesting to write because they have crossover appeal and tend to be very high-concept."

Q- Give me a little more of your background on some other projects you've worked on or written?

A-"Well, I consider myself so much more than a horror writer. I'm grateful that I won the Grand Prize in the Horror/Thriller Category at Screenplay Festival. I worked my butt off on this script. But I've also won awards as writer of other genres, as well as being a director and producer. My produced projects are 'Mouthpiece,' a Spec Comedy TV Pilot, 'Blackout,' an Indie horror film that sold internationally, 'Troublesome,' a critically acclaimed dramatic short film and 'Why T.I.?' a hip-hop music video. I was a 2007 Bill Cosby Screenwriting Fellow at USC and have advanced to the top of Sundance, Nicholl Fellowships, Scriptapalooza, PAGE Awards, Action on Film, Screenwriter's Expo, AAA, Horror Screenplay Contest and Screenplay Festival, to list a few."

Q- So what's next for you?

A-"I'm currently doing a final polish on one of my passion projects, a bio script about a 1970s and '80s disco diva. This project was truly written from the heart and I'd love to see it on the big screen in all of its glory. I'm also working with my good friend, producer, Todd Grodnick with Merrill Entertainment at The Lot Studios, to develop film and TV projects and I'm planning to direct a few of my own short films next year, including a suspense and a dark comedy. I'm lined up to produce projects outside of my company that I'm passionate about as well. While I would like to direct (I have almost 20 film, TV or short scripts), I'm more than happy to sell scripts with hopes they'd come to fruition on the big or small screen. After all, I'm a writer first!

"I also teach screenwriting and filmmaking classes/workshops at WGAW, CBS Radford and around the country for The Organization of Black Screenwriters (OBS). We're set to go on tour again in August, and it's going to be better than ever. I love teaching and I also love learning. Every time I teach I learn more about my craft and something about myself. So as a research junkie, getting to combine the two is what it's all about for me."

Hilliard Guess is the owner of Hilldog Productions in Hollywood.

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