

“Daddy said, ‘We shouldn’t...ever again!’”
Making *Kiss Daddy Goodbye*
by Alain Silver

We didn’t start out to make a zombie movie. We certainly had been inspired by the low-budget success stories in the horror genre. I had first seen *Night of the Living Dead* at a midnight show in Westwood while still a film student at UCLA in the early-1970s. But equally remarkable were *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) and *Phantasm* (1979). Most recently in May of 1980 *Friday the 13th* had cemented our plan. While many independent filmmakers have raised “doctor and dentist” money, small, discretionary investments from professionals who could afford the risk, we pitched the possibilities of *Ghost Dance* (the original title) to optometrists and realtors. Our tale was of an avaricious developer who wants to acquire some Indian land and hires some bikers to terrorize the locals before an old medicine man summons a guardian spirit to fight them. For that we needed a nearby desert location, so we drove south to the Anza-Borrego, where the temperature was 109 degrees on the 4th of July when director Patrick Regan and I, the co-writer and producer, scouted it with our proposed director of photography Peter Jensen.

A mere three weeks later, as we were poised to start work in earnest on the screenplay and aimed for a 15-day shoot in late October or early November, the Screen Actors Guild went on strike; and the entirety of Hollywood production shut down. Peter, who was a camera assistant on the television series *Fantasy Island*, was laid off. So were the crew people from every studio feature and television production. We needed a new idea, one we could write and shoot nearby and very soon. So we made a list of what we had: a lead heavy on a Harley and a black Cadillac were carried over, and to those we added houses in Malibu and Encino, some offices in Burbank, my white Porsche, Patrick’s two children, and his former brother-in-law Fabian Forte. We came up with a simple plot for *Caution: Children at Play* (the new title): a widower psychiatrist Guy Nicholas home schools his telekinetically gifted twins Michael and Beth. When Dad confronts and is killed by some trespassing bikers, his son and daughter, who have been repeatedly admonished never to reveal their powers lest they be taken away by scientists who would “stick needles” in their heads, reanimate him

and send him out to silence the bikers. We broke the story in half, gave the second portion to our co-writers and started typing as fast as we could. We didn't even think of it as a zombie movie until we came up with Beth's rebuke of her controlling brother: "You turned Daddy into a weird thing, a zombie!" That helped us decide how Nicholas would act as he lumbered about in his reanimated state. In the scene where he scares a local realtor to death, Patrick's stage direction of how to exit was "Zombie out," which the actor understood without need of further explanation.

Two weeks later we had a first draft. Before we could start casting we visited the headquarters of SAG in West Hollywood with a 40-page version of the script and a \$30,000 budget (our actual budget was hardly more than that, we had tried to raise \$75,000 but closed the offering when we got to 39) that would qualify us for the union's experimental agreement. All the staff were too busy making signs for the picket lines to pay much attention to us, so we left with our deal in hand and started casting.

Fabian was to be the local sheriff and then we had a chance to land Marilyn Burns, the sole survivor of the original chainsaw massacre. She would be the love interest, a teacher/welfare worker who monitors the home schooling. We added character actors Jon Cedar (with whom I had worked on *The Manitou*) and Marvin Miller best known for his role as the man with the check in the quirky television series, *The Millionaire*, a couple more bikers and a biker chick, one of the investors as Nicholas, two surfer/actors who had their own boards and wet suits, a policeman with his own uniform, etc. We did buy a few clothes, such as generic sheriff's uniform and two identical, cheap polyester blue suits, one of which would get damaged as Nicholas was killed, reanimated, and sent out to extract revenge in zombie mode.

Most of the equipment came from a local purveyor who provided camera, grip, and electric loaded on a truck that towed a generator, a package that he usually rented to *Little House on the Prairie*. He also sold us a lot of film stock that he was afraid would become outdated before the strike was settled. Peter brought along grips and electricians from *Fantasy Island* (who also borrowed a few items from that show) and the rest of the crew came from *Mork and Mindy*, *Happy Days*, *The Bad News Bears*, and *Laverne and Shirley* (we knew a lot of people at Paramount), rounded out by an Emmy-winning sound crew from *Hill Street Blues*. As this production was not sanctioned by any guild or union other than SAG, many of technicians chose to be credited with colorful pseudonyms.

We broke off as much of the script as possible (in the end around 15 of its 85 pages) to be done by a second unit that consisted of me, a dipsomaniac Latvian DP, and whoever wasn't needed on the first unit. We finished in ten days despite being bogged down by enough people and equipment so that, as one visitor from Paramount put it, we "looked like a real show." Despite all our deals going in—we even promoted a few picture cars from Ford and some bags of chips from Frito-Lay—

and everyone working 100% deferred, film, food, and gasoline cost real money, so we had to maximize our limited resources.

On a day based at those free local offices in Burbank (which came courtesy of a friend), the second unit spent the morning shooting ins-and-outs and dodging local police, as we had no permits. After this while the first unit redressed it from metropolitan police to the county sheriff, I took the actor who portrayed the main biker heavy's lawyer, had him don his police uniform, and pointed the camera out the office door: the black front end of a camera's assistant's American sedan pulled into the foreground, the lawyer-turned-cop walked into frame and crossed the street to make it seem as if he had pulled up in his police cruiser, then with his back to camera he arrested the biker he had just represented. On our penultimate day of production, the strike was settled, so the following week our crew went back to their regular gigs.

Then the real fun began.

First the lab scratched several thousand feet of our negative. We had purchased insurance; so our "accountant" Scott Adam, who was back in his production manager's office at Paramount, volunteered to use smoke and mirrors (after all our crew had not gotten any salary) and got us a \$12,000 pay-out. Using this new money we re-shot the affected scenes and a few others.

Our post production was even more jerry-rigged than the shoot: looping in a garage, foley done to a video transfer in my living room, reverse printing added to the work order of a feature we were hired to supervise early the next year.

In 1982 we finally had a rough cut that we showed to the infamous Edward L. Montoro of Film Ventures International. He loved it. We can say that he did without fear of contradiction because, while we planned to approach him again about US distribution after we made some for-



PENDRAGON FILM LTD. presents
KISS DADDY GOODBYE
was it their turn to raise him?

STARRING FABIAN FORTE, MARILYN BURNS, JON CEDAR
 WRITTEN BY ALAIN SILVER & PATRICK REGAN
 AND RON ABRAMS & MARY STEWART
 PRODUCED BY ALAIN SILVER DIRECTED BY PATRICK REGAN

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own sales, Montoro embezzled several millions from his company and disappeared. His whereabouts are unknown to this day. We needed some more money to finish post, so to find a foreign representative, we came up with the catchier title *Kiss Daddy Goodbye* and the tag-line, “Was it their turn to raise him?”; cut a video trailer; and did a mini-one-sheet flyer, which, while we were in the hallway talking to a seller at the American Film Market, prompted a \$30,000 offer for England and Scandinavia. Less the agent’s commission, that was about what we needed, so we took it.

I had been warned repeatedly by Marilyn Burns not to let ourselves get ripped off by disreputable distributors as had been the creators of *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. And, of course, we knew about the travails of the purportedly public domain *Night of the Living Dead*, a misappropriation that cost Romero and his partners millions. Filing for copyright was a lot more complicated in the early 1980s; but I did it. By the



Opposite, the original 2-color mini-one sheet that sold the movie at AFM 1983. Above, the French video art. Below and first page, Zombie Daddy emerges from the grave, the reason we had to buy 2 cheap suits.

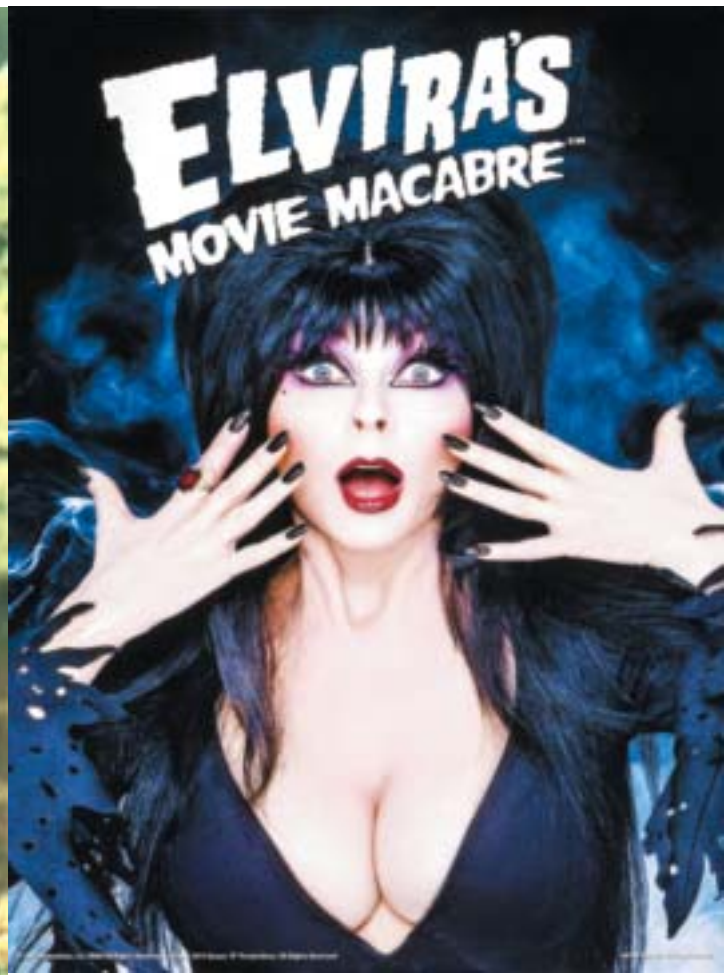


time we made a provisional domestic deal, it was clear that our New York-based foreign sales person was not paying us all that he owed. He claimed, for instance, that the French buyers had stiffed us. When I went to their offices in Paris the following year, they showed me the cancelled check. They also gave me a VHS copy of *Au Revoir Daddy* that I screened, with some trepidation, for my grandmother, aunt, uncle, and cousins and discovered that the French-dubbed performances were a lot better.

We eventually got a new person for foreign sales but by that time, our domestic seller had gotten around the restrictions in our deal by purchasing a rejected answer print from the lab that had scratched our negative. That sold via several intermediaries to the producer of the *Elvira Mistress of the Dark* show. We only found out about that when Fabian, who used to date Cassandra “Elvira” Peterson, called to say he had been hired to do comic wrap-arounds. This copy of the movie ended up in the hands of a second foreign sales person, an even more unscrupulous one, who started selling it all over the world using a bogus copyright certificate (I had refused to provide a copy of the real one until a sale was reported to us).

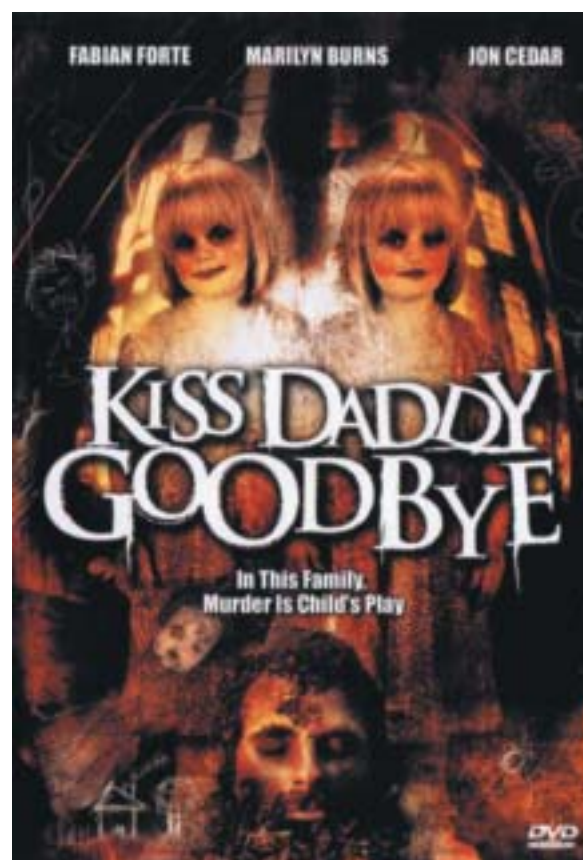
I traded some budgeting services with an attorney to get some cease-and-desist letters, had an FBI agent visit my office (she said we had a good case but it was too small to warrant the agency’s

Below, our star Fabian Forte used to date Elvira (Cassandra Peterson). He got paid by her; we never did.



involvement), and made a few threatening calls on my own. That did not stop three pirated versions in Australia, while the bootleg *Revenge of the Zombies* migrated south from Canada and the French version for which we never got the check was released in Quebec. When the duped intermediary company that sold the picture to Elvira agreed to pay us directly, they got sued and went bankrupt, and compelled me to tell the trustee that I didn't care if Wells Fargo was a secured creditor, I would sell this repeatedly stolen movie on which we owned the legitimate copyright whenever and wherever I wanted. He tacitly acquiesced.

Eventually diminishing returns and the press of new projects compelled us to move on, to kiss *Caution: Children at Play*, *Revenge of the Zombie*, *The Vengeful Dead*, and a host of foreign titles goodbye. I estimated that our worldwide gross from all legitimate sales was just over three-quarters of a million dollars. Our net on that was less than \$100,000. Who knows what money was taken in by the various film thieves who feasted on our celluloid flesh like zombies. By the way there are still two versions out there. This left one is sanctioned and the other is a bootleg.



Afterword: in 2011 Patrick Regan and I did a Q&A following a screening of *Kiss Daddy Goodbye* for the patrons of a-regular event in Hollywood known as "Horrible Movie Night."