

Career Essay

By Ed French

Make-up artistry has never been for me an end unto itself. My original intention was to be an actor, so I could transform myself into interesting characters. I never considered working in an office or serving society in some capacity that was rooted in reality and responsibility. Back then, I spent a lot of time just watching and thinking about movies and television.

During the early years of my life, my heroes were 1960's British movie actors like Boris Karloff, Alec Guinness and Peter Sellers and American character actors such as Martin Landau, Robert Culp, David McCallum, and Robert Duvall, who appeared on The Outer Limits television series and other sci-fi television epics.

Until the late 60's, there was no "Special Effects Make-up" television or film credit or award show category. Occasionally, I saw the credit "Special Character Design," or "Creative Make-Up."

In a photo in my Alvirne High School yearbook, I appear demonstrating a non-flexible colloidion scar, which I applied to a member of the Alvirne Players Drama Club using an eraser from a #2 pencil. Thirteen years later, I began sculpting prosthetics using paper clips.

My first childhood nightmare was after viewing an episode of Roald Dahl's television anthology series "Way Out" titled, "Soft Focus"! It was also my first recollection of seeing the work of make-up artist Dick Smith. In the climax of this episode, an 8 by 10 inch picture of a man's face was erased using "magical photo chemicals" as the camera cut to reveal the man in the photo with his face "whited out" supernaturally erased with an eye missing, only half a mouth and his nose completely gone. It was quite a disturbing thing for me to witness as a child in my own living room back in 1962.

A few years later, when I purchased Dick Smith's Monster Make-Up Handbook, I had no idea that Smith was the same makeup innovator who created this "erased face" as well as the amazing Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde make-up for Jack Palance in the Dan Curtis 1968 television production in the Summer of that year. At that time, I had no idea Dick Smith was responsible for those remarkable makeup illusions.

I am not an innovator, so I do not experiment with special effects make-up. I don't have the luxury of months of research and development to create prosthetic make-up, however I do keep up with the latest techniques and I know the benchmark of a good prosthetic make-up when I see it. I'm not interested in Halloween, cosmetic or clichéd makeup. I prefer believable character make-up. I would like to think that I could create any make-up effect: an alien from space, an autopsy simulation, an age progression or obese makeover.

I'd use the appropriate technique that helps create the character or effect that looks as natural and rooted in reality as possible.

I feel that decadence sets in when the audience is too aware of the techniques and process of filmmaking including make-up design.

I utilized make-up as a tool while acting on stage. When I began I was adequate at applying character make-up. It was never like a light came on inside my head saying do *this* for a living or *become* a make-up artist. I used to apply my own make-up in theatre along side of other actors who wouldn't even try to do their own make-up. I was often drafted to help apply stage make-up for fellow cast members and or give them suggestions.

I believe make-up is a useful tool or craft that help tell a story on stage. Many actors in film and theatre, mainly men distrust make-up or have no concept of how much it contributes to a performance.

In 1980, I worked on a movie titled "Smithereens" as an actor and a make-up artist.

I also began that year doing medical simulations for hospital brochures. An advertising agency in New York City was looking for a make-up artist to create an "ulcerated heel" for a hospital bandage product called "Op-site", and so I was referred by The Alcone Company - a part of Paramount Theatrical Supplies where I had began purchasing theatrical make-up in high school. I walked into the ad agency with literally no make-up kit and without a portfolio. I had only a paper bag, mortician's wax, grease paint and with the absence of stage blood, tomato paste. I was shown a photo of an actual abscess wounded heel and proceeded to take off my shoe and sock and create the effect on my own foot. I was hired on the spot. This print ad was my first professional make-up assignment.

I wasn't really trying to make a name for myself in the early 80's. I dropped out of acting and began working steadily creating movie monsters along with gruesome make-up effects.

Independent producers began to make lots of low budget horror movies in New York City in the wake of the successful film, "Friday The 13th". My first work on a feature film was on, "Amityville 2: The Possession". The next film that I worked on was the 1982's, "Sleepaway Camp". From my perspective, my make-up effect design was like starring in the movie. The challenges were interesting and they made an impact on my career. Those films gave my career momentum and the paydays kept me in show business, which was great, because I was married with a wife and newborn son at the time.

My early work in New York was mainly on exploitation movies. I was and still am a fan of the Universal Pictures "monster movies" of the 30's and 40's.

My route to this career was unique, because I had performed a decade of live theatre in the 70's before moving into special effects make-up. I'd played the lead in Shakespeare's, "Coriolanus" at New York's prestigious Off Broadway Soho Repertory. I also appeared Off Broadway in a revival of Shaw's "The Devil's Disciple". I did Bus and Truck tours of "Man Of La Mancha", was a founding member of the Portland Stage Company in Maine (known then as the Profile Theatre) where I appeared in Pinter's, "The Home Coming" with my old friend Tony Shalhoub (now famous as Monk).

I understand the theatre craft and know good storytelling when I hear it. I get how a script works, mainly because I've actually played before live audiences in productions written by major playwrights and so I always try to tell a story with special makeup effects. I try to avoid the easy "gross out" effect. If I had to make a dummy or a dismembered head, I would attempt to make it look preferably alive instead of dead.

The 1990's film, "Whispers" is a case in point. The producers told me that the prop body of the dead twin brother didn't look "dead enough". I'd created a very realistic corpse prop and they wanted it colored more "gray". They wanted the clichéd pasty skin with blackened eye sockets. If I had re-painted it like some cheesy rubber make-up in a zombie movie, it would have looked ridiculous. I didn't get into this business to do Halloween haunted house shtick. The creative solution that pleased everyone turned out to be adding the autopsy scar. So you see, you can listen to suggestions that are actually destructive and use them as the impetus and make a special effect even better, while appeasing the people with no taste and imagination.

I'm not a fan of or have rarely done over the top or extreme gory effects, but that doesn't mean I can't appreciate and enjoy them like in Stuart Gordon's movie, "The Reanimator". After I got some traction in this business, I rented and watched everything I could find including the movies, "Blood Feast" and "I Spit On Your Grave" which was obviously idiotic, pornographic cheap exploitation...but, hey, Shakespeare's first play was "Titus Andronicus", (theatre of cruelty). I'm sure the groundlings lapped that up as well as "Grand Guignol" too. I haven't forgotten the kick that I got the first time I saw, "The Killer Shrews" or "Attack of the Crab Monsters" on Chiller Theatre. But if I had to go to a desert island with a handful of DVD's, they'd be movies by Welles, Bergman, Kurosawa and the like.

I worked very hard towards the beginning of my career. Up until about 1988, all the special make-up effects work on a given project such as, lifecasts, sculpting, molding, fabricating gelatin and foam latex prosthetics, detailing fake heads with hair, teeth, etc. as well as on set application, was designed and applied by me. I had no idea how to delegate work to assistants. The projects paid very little and I would have to stretch my budgets. I was usually paid a flat fee and whatever money remained after all the expenses were my earnings.

I also learned the craft of film make-up as opposed to theatre makeup. I did it all and I think I did a fine job considering my inexperience and limited contact with others I could learn from in New York. I am pleased that some of my work on the television anthology, "Tales From the Darkside" still holds up today. I enjoyed the opportunity that series gave

me to create some wonderful characters and monsters featured in scripts by George Romero and Robert Bloch. I even appeared as various monsters in one episode opposite one of my acting teachers, Bill Hickey (The Circus) from the Herbert Berghoff studio.

I returned to my “roots” in 2004 when I worked on a feature film called, “Venom” which was originally titled “Backwater”. It was like something I would have done in the 80’s, except it had a higher budget and Jim Gillespie was a very inventive and talented director. It was a “ slasher” type movie, but at least it was a *supernatural* monster on the loose killing the usual assortment of teenage targets.

Many of the “direct to video”, low budget productions I worked on throughout the 1980’s in New York, weren’t even good enough to be called campy, but it was where I got my start. A few years later I was nominated for an Oscar for “Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country”. I’ve also had 6 Emmy nominations and won the Emmy for the TV show House for the 2007 episode titled, “Que Sera Sera”, so you could say I’m making progress.

Obviously you must repeat yourself if you create a character for a film and need to duplicate that prosthetic make-up day after day. I’m not concerned with breaking new ground, but I’ve improved as an artist over the years. I deal with many jobs where the turnaround, particularly in television is short. The challenge becomes delivering good work with little or no preparation time.

My main assets now are talent, inventiveness and experience, which are a big edge I have over the great new talent entering the field. Some producers value that more than anything else. Talent and great enthusiasm, dedication and a professional business demeanor probably beat everything else hands down. There are extremely talented artists who can’t get a job in this industry, because they’re terrible businesspeople and completely undiplomatic in their dealings on the set. You don’t have to be the Albert Einstein of make-up to succeed in earning a living at this.

Many special effects makeup” practitioners are egotistical. They’re entitled. Here’s how I see it. To get the job done, I have to be a sculptor, painter, chemist, dentist, mold maker, hair dresser, engineer, magician, first class counterfeiter and understand the workings of a movie script. In addition, I also have to work with an actor sitting in the makeup chair, who has an even larger ego than mine. No other person working in any other capacity on the movie set can “fake” what I have to deliver in front of the supremely objective eye of the camera lens. No other crewmember could perform my job and deliver it at the requisite artistic level that I do. By the same token, if I spent the weekend brushing up on any of the other jobs or crafts on that set including the directors, I could “fake it” by call time Monday morning. That thought has often crossed my mind, but I punch a time clock like every other lunch bucket, so I never drop my “Jeeves the Butler” persona.

There are mediocre artists who have won Academy Awards for being competent craftsmen, who producers, actors and crew enjoy having on their movie sets. They love being make-up artists and they deliver artesian work in a timely fashion. I have a

reputation for imagination and creativity that keeps me employed in the industry. I'd also like to think I bring an element of some originality to what I do, but it's probably just the fact that I come to work prepared. I'm a calm, reassuring presence on the set. I'm good at concealing the insecurity.

It's been years since I've done an independent project. They're a wonderful opportunity if you're starting out in the business. I haven't been ambitious or competitive enough to head a big budget effects movie in a while. I like television shows and television commercials where it's more "hands on" and I have more control over the special effects make-up. I make a good living doing these things and the hours aren't so long that the project monopolizes my down time.

"Chopper Chicks In Zombie Town" originally had the great title, "Chrome Hearts". It was my first job when I moved to Los Angeles. I accepted the job because I needed the gig during the writer's strike that was killing the work at the time.

The director of C.C.I.Z.T. told me to my face, *seriously* mind you, that this film was an "homage" to "The Magnificent Seven", except instead of cowboy gunfighters ridding the village of Mexican bandits, these were a gang of biker chicks rescuing a town from nuclear zombies. He was a nice enough guy who was fresh out of film school, but he was no budding Kurosawa. The movie ended up being directed by the assistant director whose name was appropriately enough, Ronald McDonald. I comforted myself thinking that something this moronic and ineptly executed, would never light up a theatre screen. This rubbish made "The Three Stooges Meets Snow White" look like an Einsteinian masterwork. I thought it would be impossible to splice this mess into something an audience could sit through and not demand a refund, but I was naïve then and still overestimated the intelligence of horror movie fans, so it was a double shock to hear that this thing had not only been released, but that the accomplice to the decline of Western civilization was a distribution company called Troma. I'd met with the two-headed president of this firm a few years earlier when I was in New York and walked out of the interview after one of the heads muttered, "He's not hungry enough." Agreed, but listen, I've had hungry days too.

If you want to stay in the game you take most of the bookings that come your way and make the most of the material you're given. Big production or small, you usually have to battle in order to get what you need (mainly preparation time, application time, a proper make-up room, etc.) in order to create professional make-up results. You try not to burn any bridges, but everyone has a few smoldering down the river after a decade or two. I spent this most recent writer's strike in 2008 in Durango, Mexico doing James Marster's Piccolo's make-up for the upcoming James Wong film, "Dragonball". There was no work for me in L.A. It was a tough shoot, but I was thankful that my career had enough traction to keep me employed during this disastrous work stoppage for many of my peers. I don't think there are cons to working on a small independent project in the beginning of your career. Just be a little picky about who you work for. They need you more than you need them.

I worked during this past year with Harry Shearer (Derek Smalls in the movie, “Spinal Tap”). I transformed Harry into George W. Bush, Elvis Presley, Dick Cheney and Dr. Phil. Harry, while wearing my character make-up, does a brilliant impersonation of Dick Cheney as a lounge singer (No Cooler for the Scooter). It was a very complicated and elaborate prosthetic make-up that I applied to Harry, who looks nothing like Cheney and yet it was completely believable. My work is featured on his website (www.mydamnchannel.com) in Harry’s brilliant satire, which he flawlessly performs being a top-notch actor, writer and director. That’s as good as it gets. It’s very satisfying when I can look at the Television monitor and even I am amazed at the illusion. That gives me hope and it keeps me connected to what excited me about movies when I was younger.

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