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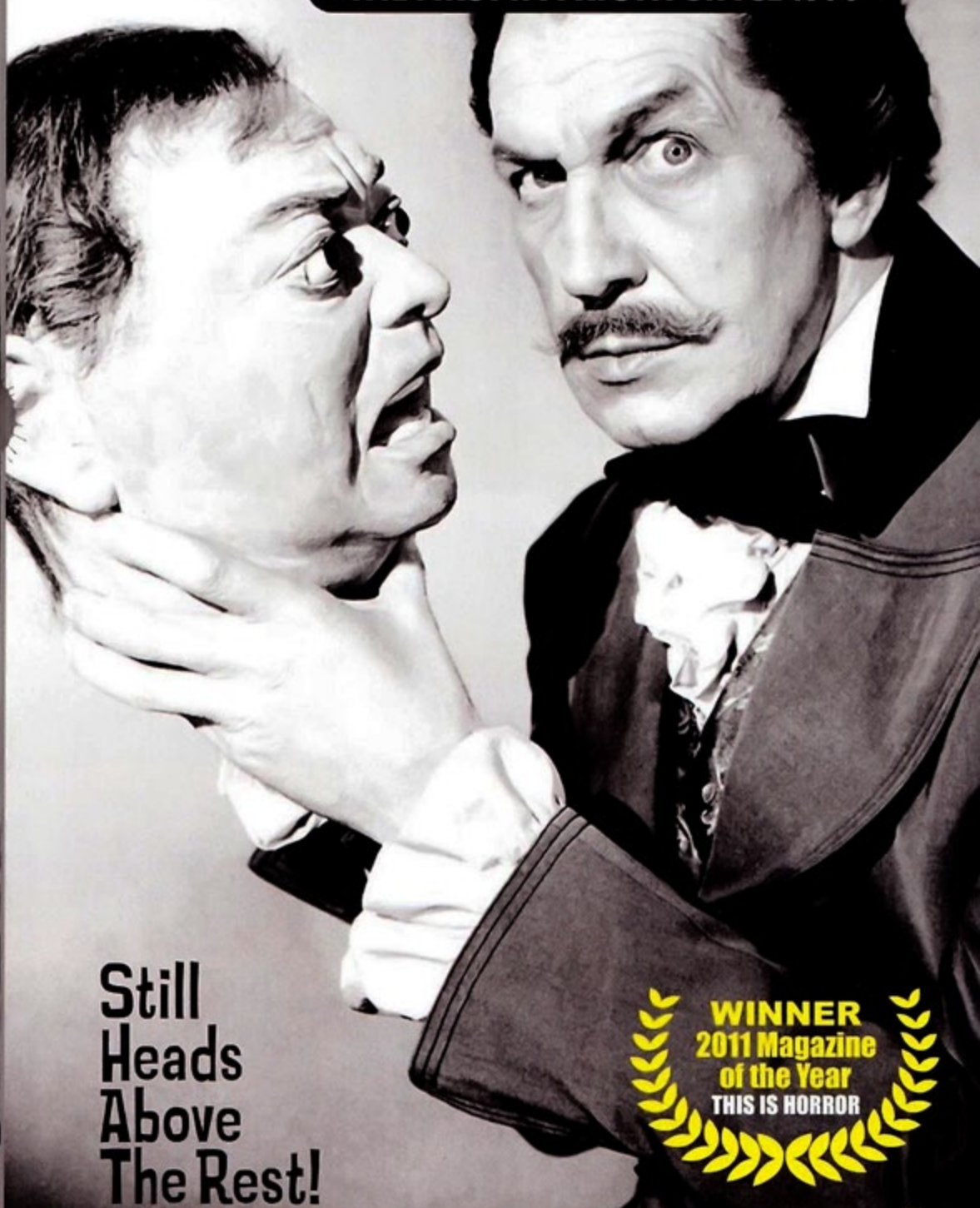
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NOTES FROM THE UNDERGROUND



By JUSTIN McCONNELL

FRUSTRATION TO INSPIRATION: THE PATH TO THE COLLAPSED



Through all manner of obstacles and setbacks, Justin McConnell's passion for filmmaking never Collapsed.

Before sitting down to write this article, I searched for a source of inspiration to guide me, eventually turning to the past. More specifically, I excavated stacks of old FANGORIAs, artifacts of the long-standing subscription held while I was a teenager, in the mid-'90s. After all these years, turning to the words of others, the pioneers of Notes from the Underground, a clear picture formed in my head. The passion, the personality, the drive, the back-breaking efforts these filmmakers put into their work—and I hadn't heard of a single one since.

Keep in mind, this is about a five-year cross-section of articles, from 1995-1999, but it still reinforced a simple truth: The vast majority of people don't make it in this business. These clearly talented individuals started in the underground, were lucky enough to gain some national notoriety at a time before the Internet truly exploded, yet stayed underground.

Recently, I completed my first narrative feature, the postapocalyptic horror/thriller *The Collapsed* (well, technically, second feature—but I won't count *Strata* since I shot that in high school, and the less said about it, the better). It has gone

on to do fairly well critically (for the most part) and sold to five countries at this point, to companies I grew up collecting, such as Anchor Bay Canada. We had a limited theatrical release here in the Great White North, and have been selected for over a dozen festivals thus far. Given the instant nature of news on the Internet, it would appear that my film, like many others, and I had popped out of thin air, another voice added to the already deafening cacophony of new cinema talent. There are more of us out there than ever, using increasingly affordable gear, shooting on budgets that wouldn't have paid for a short film in the '80s. It might seem this way, but for pretty much everyone, the road is long to get to the point where the press and the public are willing to take you seriously.

I recently turned 30, and looking back, the journey to this point has taken 10 years, with an additional decade of inspiration and media consumption shaping

the path I'd take. Two-thirds of my life have been spent pursuing that path, one that somewhere along the line became a calling. An identity. There have been many times along the way where I've felt like throwing in the proverbial towel, where I felt nothing was ever going to pan out, or that maybe I was just delusional and nothing I ever made would have any value. The secret fear of every single artist: What if everything I've made is terrible? After years of disappointment, or your work not getting exposure, doubts rise up.

Defiantly, I pushed forward, and will continue to. With years of struggle come wisdom, and eventual hindsight. Over the years, I've made a bunch of music videos, short films, a couple of feature documentaries (*Working Class Rock Star* and *Skull World*), and each and every one was a lesson. You begin to realize early on that your moviemaking education doesn't happen while you're being taught, and that film



Sometimes the most effective villains don't require much in the way of makeup or costumes.

schools just open the doors and guide you further. Your education and growth is an ongoing process, and every production is essential. You don't become a good filmmaker by sitting on your ass—you do it by making films.

Eight years ago, I met my partner in crime, my co-writer/co-producer Kevin Hutchinson. Together we've produced a lot, and written/brainstormed countless more. It was while we were trying to secure financing for a much larger feature, *The Eternal*, that we decided to say "Screw it" and shoot *The Collapsed* on whatever money we could. This feature was born out of frustration, but turned out to be absolutely the right choice. I don't know what took us so long to realize it.

Let me back up a bit. When I was first trying to get my foot in the door, I'd try anything and everything to make it to the next step. I started making music videos and working with artists in the metal scene, with the hope that this would be a natural way to progress and grow—and then the bottom fell out of the music industry. Labels cut their budgets, bands were generally a broke bunch to begin with and it just wasn't sustainable. At this

Don't go forward naively thinking your favorite genre icon is worth anything in the eyes of distributors.

point, seeing where things were heading, I set out and made *Working Class Rock Star* over several years, paid for entirely from my pocket. Once I finished it, I needed a sales agent, and this was my crash course on just how fickle and brutal the industry can be.

In short, this "agent" (who will remain nameless) conned me out of a fairly sizable amount of money (adding to my already massively accumulated debt), and I eventually ended up selling the film directly myself. I should use the word "sell" here ironically, though. To this date, despite playing the past few years on a national pay-cable network and being available on VOD through multiple platforms as well as DVD in North America, I've made exactly zero dollars on it. My TV distributors went into creditor protection (meaning my money goes to their investors, legally. How does that work?), and a series of events made me rethink my entire approach to the game. At the end of the day, it was a stepping-stone and a lesson learned.

I now moved forward a lot more carefully. Kevin and I wrote and began shopping *The Eternal* in 2008, a year after we shot the short film it was based on, *Ending the Eternal* (which in turn was based on a short story I wrote in high school). Interest in the project was almost instantaneous, because we played the "chicken or the egg" game with the press. We had a little bit of "first money" committed, but we announced the launch of a feature-film



The Collapsed proves that the end of the world need not be a cost-prohibitive subject.

slate over the coming years, with *The Eternal* being the flagship title.

We took initial meetings with some serious companies at that year's Toronto International Film Festival, I worked my ass off and called agents directly, quietly attaching some fairly big genre actors to the film, got together a huge crew and had early meetings with notable distributors. By the end of November, we were halfway committed on a nearly \$2.5-million budget—which, as anyone can tell you who actually knows what they're talking about, is a lot of money for an indie project. Then the recession hit, the investors pulled their offers over financial worry and we were dead in the water.

We pressed on. In 2009, we wrote the first issue of a tie-in graphic novel, *The Eternal: Final Dawn*, paid to have it illustrated and shot a teaser trailer on the RED. That year, I hit the AFM for the first time, and learned that our budget was

still too high for the needs of the market. One very honest agent called the budget "insurmountable" in terms of sales, and he was right. This took a lot of meetings, research and time to realize, but this is important for every aspiring filmmaker to know given the current state of the industry. You may want to sit down: Unless you have A-list talent, or some well-known fighter/wrestler, attached to your film, you're making a huge mistake producing for anything more than \$500-750K. Even that is highly risky. A lot of indie films only stand to make about \$300-500K worldwide in today's market—if they're lucky—and that is paid out over a two-year period. I didn't know any of this going in; now you do.

And don't go forward naively thinking your favorite genre icon is worth anything in the eyes of distributors. Many of the names that first pop into your head won't make your average buyer bat an eyelash.

A good short movie doesn't always help in *Ending the Eternal* struggle to find financing for the feature version.





Part of *The Collapsed's* terror lies in the fact that neither Scott (John Fantasia) nor the viewer knows exactly what he's shooting at.

They help, especially with the fans, but they don't make your film a "sure thing."

We decided to cut our budget on *The Eternal* and move forward again. Sometime around then, I had a conversation with my good friend Adam Mason (director of *The Devil's Chair*, *Blood River*, etc.), and he told me how he made his movie

***The Collapsed* was born out of frustration, but turned out to be absolutely the right choice.**

Broken himself (which then went on to sell to Dimension and more). At that moment, it finally clicked in my head. That was the day we said "Screw it," and *The Collapsed* was born.

I'm going to be entirely candid about this, knowing that your average sales agent would tell me I'm insane to talk numbers. We reverse-engineered *The Collapsed*, in a way. Knowing how much money we had to spend (less than \$40,000) to get the movie to the point where a screener would be available for sales, we wrote it keeping every dollar and cent in mind. From this point, the project came together very quickly. After two months of Kevin and I doing the vast majority of preproduction ourselves, from auditions to shopping for every single prop, we were finally set to shoot at the end of August 2010. I was finally going to camera on my debut narrative feature, getting to shoot with professional gear and crew (RED, Steadicam, crane, etc.), and it wasn't the result of a bunch of meetings and investment pitches. We just got fed up, and did it ourselves.

We shot over 14 days, had a great crew and an even better cast, considering the money. We had problems while producing, since it's difficult to pull off an effective postapocalyptic horror movie on such a tiny budget (I even ended up having to cater the entire shoot), but in the end, the results are up on screen.

Once the movie was cut to a picture lock, but not final sound mix or color, I took screeners and hit the AFM again.

There I first met up with my great sales agents at Raven Banner Entertainment, and have finally started to experience the ways in which the industry can be good to you as well. Some of the negative press we've received can be tough to accept, but you have to treat all of that like a learning experience as well. At this point, *The Collapsed* is set to be released in multiple territories, including the U.S. and Canada on DVD from Anchor Bay in the first half of this year, and the rest of the world will soon be able to judge for themselves. Those discs will feature two commentaries and a documentary that reveal more of the specifics of how the movie was made.

My point here is that getting a film finished, and out to the world, is a milestone that most people never reach. Many more fade into obscurity after releasing their first "blood, sweat and tears" opus. For years I've been working to get to this point, and now that my foot is in the door and things are looking up, I have to respond accordingly. I can't get lazy, because that's the first mistake. I have to keep learning, never believe I know everything and realize there's always room for improvement. There will be a ton of opportunities for my team and me in the future,

if I'm open to them and proceed forward... if I implement the knowledge I've accumulated over the years, and realize the one fundamental truth guiding the film industry: Nobody truly knows what they're doing. Nobody is an expert. Everyone is just a person like me, experimenting and trying new things until something works. New technology, content-delivery formulas and sales realities have shaped the future of independent film into a shaky, unpredictable Wild West. So stay on your toes, keep your ear to the ground and be the best gunslinger you can be. But move forward, however you can. The easiest way to lose a duel is to never draw your weapon.

Metaphors aside, I've already got my next goal in mind. With the help of newfound notoriety and contacts made as a direct result of producing a feature on pocket change, we are finally gearing



The work doesn't end when a movie is done; then comes the time to promote it.

back up for *The Eternal*. I live for film, and horror, and can't wait to see what future productions are in store. I only hope the audience wants to come along for the ride.

You can read more about *The Collapsed* in *Fango* #309, where—correction time—a photo of the character Phil (played by Stefano Gallo) was misidentified as Scott (John Fantasia).



When making a low-budget horror film, make sure no one drives off with any important props.