



IT CAME TO WISCONSIN! Independent Film Fest Invades Racine.

By Richard Ostrom

“Now, let's make some art!”

It is this phrase, immortalized by the legendary Lloyd Kaufman, that best encapsulates the do-it-yourself philosophy of independent filmmaking. For those unfamiliar, Lloyd Kaufman is the maverick head honcho of Troma Studios, the longest running fully independent film company in existence (33 years and counting!).

Troma is responsible for endearing classics such as “Class of Nuke ’em High,” “Surf Nazis Must Die!” and, who can forget “The Toxic Avenger.”

Lloyd was also the top-billed guest of It Came From Lake Michigan, the debut installment of a (hopefully) annual event in our beloved state’s deep southern region.

Taking place the weekend of October 20-22 in the Racine/Kenosha area, It Came From Lake Michigan wore Mr. Kaufman’s catch phrase as its code of honor.

The fest, focusing on horror/sci-fi primarily, was all about the art. In exploring this art, one becomes astonished at the joy, pride, struggle and reward of making it, along with the tireless dedication of the individuals whose sweat and perseverance are behind it all.

The standards of the festival format were well adhered to. Alongside the requisite industry pros were vendors of genre-related merchandise and plenty of hands-on would-be auteurs out to make a name for their latest

homegrown epic.

Among the latter is Gary Ugarek, on hand to pimp his zombie opus “Deadlands – The Rising.”

Hailing from Gaithersburg, Maryland, Ugarek is a committed grassroots filmmaker who handled multiple facets on the production (directing, acting, editing and scripting). Speaking to a small yet attentive crowd at his booth, Mr. Ugarek was beaming with confidence. He happily responded to questions ranging from “How’d you get started?” to “What are some tips on stretching every last penny of your movie’s budget?” as well as recalling his experiences as an extra on George Romero’s “Land of the Dead,” which inspired him to tackle his own take on the living dead.

Later in the evening Ugarek held a screening of “Deadlands” at UW-Parkside and made himself available for a Q&A session afterwards. Watching his film I was intrigued to see how much Mr. Ugarek had done with so little (reportedly just shy of \$15,000). Granted, the acting is largely stiff and the dialog a long way from Shakespeare, but the film has a solid pace and some successful set pieces. The follow-up interaction with Mr. Ugarek provided more zealous pointers and anecdotes on the creation of a micro-budgeted feature.

Also on display at the fest were a plethora of short films, documentaries and even more full length extravaganzas. Some of the handful taken in by yours truly:

“Yardwork,” featuring a greedy woman, buried treasure and zombies; “I Know An Old Lady,” telling a somber tale of murder solely using stark black and white still shots; “Keep Drinking Men!” a tongue-in-cheek chronicle of the making of “Beer Drinkers In Space,” a low-grade “Star Trek” knock off thrown together by some bored former Disney employees. The director of this last cheesy spectacular, Frank Delle, was present to introduce and comment on the effort.

Perusing the dealer tables between screenings I encountered all manner of goodies and lively, colorful people. Michael Barryman (of “The Devil’s Rejects,” “The Hills Have Eyes” and the Motley Crue “Smokin’ In the Boys’ Room” – was doing the autograph thing while telling tales of picking his son up from school after a long day’s work on “Star Trek,” still in his full Vulcan makeup!

Beside him sat actor Eddie Deezen (whom you may recollect from his pivotal role in “Assault of the Killer Bombos,” right?) and B-movie sex bombs Brinke Stevens and Amy Lynn Best.

Elsewhere one could find an assortment of books, DVD/VHS flicks, toys, masks and an entire table loaded with the finest of the Troma Studio’s vast library of hot cinematic poetry.

I picked up Lloyd Kaufman’s “Make Your Own Damn Movie” 5-disc box set (a steal at under \$50!). It is a 12-hour film school on video and an extension of Lloyd’s in demand Master Class seminar, which was held at the Racine Civic Centre on Saturday afternoon.

Now this was a real treat. For two hours Lloyd Kaufman employed his 30-plus years of experience to share insights and guide fans and wannabe film makers through the trenches of the independent film labyrinth. Kaufman intercut his lecture with clips from the aforementioned box set, giving visual aid to his teachings. He also offered up information on “Tromadance,” established seven years prior in Utah as an

alternative to the higher profile Sundance (run by some big shot Hollywood guy, uh, Bob something or other).

Tromadance offers a fair, inexpensive (all entries are free!) outlet for true independents to get their works screened and noticed. It is also easier to deal with on a personal scale than the “elitist, P.R. driven Sundance,” as Mr. Kaufman puts it. Kaufman found time as well to fit in a plug for Troma’s latest in-house future classic, “Poultrygeist – Night of the Chicken Dead.”

Overall, during his seminar, Lloyd Kaufman solidified his loyalty and affinity with the independent scene. His hopes are that the information he imparts will greatly help and/or inspire others to create films all their own.

“You’ll probably do a better job than me!” he adds with a snicker of modesty.

At the end of my visit to this inaugural episode of *It Came From Lake Michigan*, I was left with a feeling of fulfillment. The fest proved eccentric and entertaining in the ways I expected it to be (the gleefully tacky charms of low-budget cinema, the infectious energy of all the D.I.Y. hustlers). However, it was also an educating and enlightening endeavor with plenty of intelligent conversation with members of all levels of the independent film industry.

Between the drive of the many hardworking film makers and the boundless support of the many avid fans, I have increased my own knowledge and enthusiasm for this truly genuine aspect of the cinematic art form. Props to organizer Wayne Clingman and his posse for all the hard labor, it really paid off. A big gnarly thumbs up and best wishes on further installments of *It Came From Lake Michigan*.

For additional info check, www.itcamefromlakemichigan.com and www.troma.com.

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