

Below the Line

KNB: House of Illusion

By Henry Turner

Greg Nicotero, one of the co-founders of KNB EFX Group, has led a charmed life. A native of Pittsburgh, he grew up watching the popular *Chiller Theater* on television, and like a lot of kids, became obsessed with the show's makeup and gory effects. After one particular presentation, the *Chiller Theater* host interviewed *Night of the Living Dead* director **George Romero**, also a Pittsburgh native, who was at the time preparing to shoot *Dawn of the Dead*. The teenage Nicotero later met Romero by chance in a restaurant in Rome while vacationing in Italy.

"Of all places to meet him!" he recounts. Nicotero's uncle was a local actor in Pittsburgh and had played in one of George's films. "So I walked up to George when dinner was over and said, 'Hey, you know my uncle, he was in *The Crazies*.' That was my pick-up line."

The pair kept in touch until finally Romero offered the young Nicotero work on another of his films. "It was just kind of like, oh, this kid is really interested in special effects in movies," remembers Nicotero.

Nicotero was, by this time, studying pre-med but when the call came through from Romero that another zombie picture was greenlit, he decided to put aside his stethoscope for good.

"All of a sudden in 1984 they called and asked if I wanted to come on board for *Day of the Dead*," says Nicotero. "I said 'hold that thought,' and called (gore maestro) **Tom Savini**, who was doing the makeup for the film, and whom I'd met through George."

Savini agreed to let Nicotero be his assistant, managing the makeup effects department, going through script breakdowns and figuring out how many sets of appliances were needed each day. "I had no training in it; it just kind of came naturally," he remembers.

Within a year Nicotero had relocated first to New York and then to Los Angeles. "I just sort of stayed with the steam-rolling train. After being in LA for two weeks, I was working with **Stan Winston** on *Invaders from Mars* and *Aliens*."

In LA, Nicotero met fellow makeup artists

Howard Berger and **Bob Kurtzman**. Soon the three were renting a house together.

"We were all freelancing and we used to hang out, you know, drink beer and eat pizza and watch horror movies. And one day we said, why not do this for ourselves? With my sort of organization background, and Howard as shop foreman, and Kurtzman being the creative type, we all complemented each other."

The trio's first movie project was *Evil Dead Two*, in 1988. **Scott Spiegel**, the film's co-writer, was looking for special effects on a budget, says Nicotero. "I said, 'We'll do it!' That was the first KNB job. It all snowballed from there."

KNB's first mainstream assignment was the creation of 20 cadavers for the film *Gross Anatomy*—work that brought the company to the attention of **Kevin Costner**, who was then preparing *Dances With Wolves*. While creating horror makeups for films such as *Nightmare on Elm Street 5* and *Texas Chain Saw Massacre 3*, the company created 22 realistic fake buffalo for the Costner epic.

"Within three years from the inception of the company, we catapulted ourselves out of the low-budget horror realm, and all of a sudden we were working for people like Costner

and **Rob Reiner** on *Misery*," says Nicotero.

The KNB facilities grew exponentially to accommodate its additional business. An 800-square-foot shop in Chatsworth in 1988, now the company boasts a 22,000-square-foot facility in Van Nuys. "We have an entire machine shop for building mechanisms for all the puppet work. We have a whole fabrication area, and a costume area, and sculpting and mold making. We have about 40 employees that are pretty much on staff year round here. Sculptors, fabricators, technicians, seamstresses. A little bit of everything."

Over the years the KNB client list has grown to include **Steven Spielberg**, (*Minority Report*, *Amistad*), **Quentin Tarantino** (everything from *Reservoir Dogs* to *Kill Bill Two*), **Robert Rodriguez**, **Michael Bay** and **John Carpenter**.

"We really carved a niche for ourselves as a versatile effects company that can do not only realistic prosthetics, but also animatronic animals and cadavers," says Nicotero.

Though co-founder Kurtzman left the company amicably two years ago, production has not

slowed down. Recent film and television work includes *House of Wax*, *Amityville Horror*, *Serenity*, *Sin City*, *Desperation*, *The Island*, *Adventures of Shark Boy and Lava Girl*, *Deadwood*, *Land of the Dead*, and *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*.

For *The Island*, Nicotero used his medical training in his conception of the clone bodies. "We did 70 bodies for one scene and 45 for another. The idea is that the first things that grow are the veins, which then secrete the rest of the human body, creating it from inside out," he explains. "We created seven different stages of these bodies that went from just veins to clear bodies in which you could see the veins and the bones inside, and then the skin would form over top of that, and then the bodies would be birthed and then grow from there. It's grotesque but sort of beautiful."

So real are the cadavers made by KNB that a couple years ago an urban legend was circulating that

the bodies thrown from a truck in *Bad Boys Two* were actual human corpses—a legend Nicotero heartily denies, since the bodies were actually made by KNB.

Such legends attest to the

accuracy of the creations—and yet realism has its setbacks. "On *Land of the Dead* we found a really unique way to do a zombie bite that looks as realistic as possible. But the irony is that if it looks too real the ratings board will say it's too gratuitous."

Nicotero attributes the success of KNB to two sources—the first being the actors who bring the makeups to life. As examples of this he cites **Mickey Rourke** and **Nick Stahl**, whose performances in *Sin City* were enhanced by substantial prosthetic contributions from KNB. "Our job is only halfway done, the actor really finishes it," he says.

And then there is his staff. "I've got a tremendous group of talented people here. Puppeteers, makeup artists, a lot of union makeup artists and SAG puppeteers, and so many crafts people and artisans. We couldn't do it without them; they're the people who really make it happen."



Greg Nicotero



Greg Nicotero on the set of *Evil Dead 2* with **Bruce Campbell**



Zombie makeup for *Land of the Dead*