

# how to make a zombie

**T**he first thing is to find a willing guinea pig. Little brothers are always good. You'll need someone who's able to sit still for two hours. Like making sausage, creating a zombie requires patience. It's a long, messy process. And a deeply satisfying one, too, for those with the stomach for such things...

UNLESS YOU SUBSCRIBE TO FANGORIA, CHANCES are you've never heard of Greg Nicotero. But you've definitely seen his work. He's the guy who engineered the syringe to Uma Thurman's heart in *Pulp Fiction*. He choreographed the hobbling of James Caan's ankles in *Misery*. He's the makeup effects whiz who turned Mickey Rourke into the brick-faced bruiser Marv in *Sin City* and crafted Dirk's diggler in *Boogie Nights*.

Planning to shoot an incredibly gory scene? Better call **GREG NICOTERO**, the makeup effects artist for directors George A. Romero, Quentin Tarantino, and Robert Rodriguez.

by chris nashawaty

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Tonight, though, Nicotero is busy with what may be regarded as his biggest triumph by the geeks and fanboys who regard him as a god. He's creating zombies—legions and legions of lumbering, decaying, flesh-hungry zombies—on the Toronto set of George A. Romero's *Land of the Dead*. Coming on the heels of such new-style genre flicks as *28 Days Later*, *Shaun of the Dead*, and *Resident Evil*, *Land of the Dead* is the latest installment in Romero's original zombie saga that kicked off with 1968's *Night of the Living Dead*, peaked with 1979's *Dawn of the Dead*, and seemingly petered out with 1985's *Day of the Dead*. Granted, much of the burden of reviving the franchise rests on Romero himself. But if Nicotero can give the gorehounds something they've never seen before—something truly sick and new—then he might just go down as the man who brought the walking dead back to the land of the living once and for all.

Nicotero is 42, with long, blond rock & roll hair, and the giddy demeanor of an adolescent boy yet to discover girls. Taking a break from the makeup chair, Nicotero apologizes for the fact that his shirt, pants, and chunky black boots are spattered with blood. "I'm pretty much covered in blood all the time," he says. "Last week I flew home to L.A. and I didn't have a chance to do laundry first. I had a suitcase full of bloody clothes. I'm just waiting for someone to stop me at the airport and check my luggage, or for the maid to come in and think I'm some mass murderer who hasn't been caught yet."

As he says this, a puddle of dried blood on the ground next to him marks the spot where, earlier in the evening, an actor was disemboweled in a zombie feeding frenzy. The puddle has the sticky consistency of strawberry jam, and in the middle of it, a fat noodle of latex intestine still marks the scene of the crime. Nicotero doesn't notice any of this until it's pointed out. "We took a small intestine and a large intestine and tucked them into a body cavity so that when you reach in and grab them they stretch. We told the zombie actors right as we were ready to roll, 'Okay, if you get down to the bottom, underneath the sternum there's a heart and a kidney so you can really go crazy.' Everything was flying!"

For the record, Nicotero insists he's a normal guy. Yes, he has a

robot from *Lost in Space* in his Tarzana, Calif., home, and owns a miniature spaceship from *Alien* and a six-foot-tall replica of Han Solo frozen in carbonite. And yes, fellow film nerds like Quentin Tarantino and Robert Rodriguez occasionally drop by for model-painting parties. But he's not off-kilter in the way most people expect him to be just because he traffics in carnage for a living. He enjoys watching *Judge Judy*. And he has a wife and two kids—a wife and two kids he'd like to spend more time with if business weren't so good.

In the past year alone, Nicotero and his partner Howard Berger's company, KNB EFX, have rivaled effects legends like Stan Winston and Rick Baker in terms of quality and outpaced them in terms of quantity. "We've done the last couple seasons of *24*, *Law & Order*, *Without a Trace*; we did *House of Wax*, *The Lion*, *the Witch and the Wardrobe*, *Sin City*, *Fat Albert*, *The Amityville Horror*, *The Island*, *Deadwood*, *Cursed*—and that's just one year!" Nicotero's eyes are bloodshot. He hasn't slept for more than four hours any night in a month.



**MISERY**  
Nicotero had Bates use a real sledgehammer: "That's the reason the gag sells."

*The next thing you'll need in order to make a zombie is Pros-Aide, an adhesive used to apply foam latex prosthetics. Foam pieces painted to look like rotting flesh are glued to the guinea pig's face. Feel free to vary how decomposed you want the zombie to look. The darker and more leathery-looking the skin, the longer they've been dead. Next come lace eyebrows and a wig. Zombie wigs are treated with conditioner to make the hair look stringy. You have to figure the zombie has been out in the rain and elements, so its hair should be limp and flat...*

**W**HEN GREG NICOTERO WAS A LITTLE BOY GROWING UP IN Pittsburgh, he was constantly being woken up by nightmares. Nicotero's father was a well-respected physician, and it was assumed that Greg would follow in his footsteps. But Nicotero was more interested in classic horror movies, and he'd stay up until 4 a.m. every Saturday night watching Chiller Theater marathons.

While sitting through movies like *Creature From the Black Lagoon* and *Frankenstein*, Nicotero would sketch the monsters in a notebook.

When he felt tired, he'd splash cold water on his face. "Those Saturday nights were the greatest nights of my life," says Nicotero. "Being 42 years old now, it sounds silly. But I remember there were nights that I would actually fall asleep before the second monster movie came on and I would wake up Sunday morning really depressed."

Around the same time, a few neighborhoods away in Pittsburgh, a 21-year-old named Tom Savini was enlisting in the Army. Savini had spent his teen years obsessed with making up his friends to look like elderly Japanese men and burn victims. Rather than face the Vietnam draft, he signed up for the Army's photography school. In 1969, he was shipped off to Can Tho, 90 miles south of Saigon.

As part of the Army's 244th Military Intelligence unit, Savini's job was to take pictures of dead Vietcong soldiers. "I didn't look at it horrifically, I studied it," says Savini. "I think we all have a safety device where you're able to turn off your emotions. I think your mind helps you do that to safeguard your sanity."

Still, Savini admits that when he returned to the States, the things he saw in Vietnam caught up with him. "It took years for my emotions to come back. My marriage went right into the toilet because I was a walking zombie." After working as a makeup artist on a number of cheapie horror films, Savini was asked by fellow Pittsburgh resident George A. Romero to do the makeup effects on *Dawn of the Dead*. The movie instantly turned Savini into a celebrity in horror-film circles.

Nicotero was one of those fans. When he was 13, Nicotero would show up at Romero and Savini's movie sets to make small talk and show them his sketches. Later, when Nicotero went off to college, he went premed just as his father had hoped. But shortly before his senior year, Savini offered him a job on *Day of the Dead*. Nicotero remembers the exact day he began as Savini's assistant—July 9, 1984. To no one's surprise, he never returned to school. "I always thought his family probably had it in for Tom and me because they wanted Greg to be a doctor," says Romero. "There was probably a period there where they were ready to come after me with a shotgun."

"We used to call him Gut Boy," adds Savini. "On *Day of the Dead*,

Greg would call the slaughterhouse and try to find us pig intestines. And when we needed them on the set we'd call for Gut Boy." Nicotero also landed a role in the film as a young soldier who meets a gruesome end. For Nicotero's death scene, Savini built an animatronic severed head that looked just like him. And after the film wrapped, Nicotero took the severed head home to Pittsburgh, where he put it in his bed and called his mother into the room on Thanksgiving morning. "I don't think she spoke to him for the rest of Thanksgiving Day," says Savini.

Despite his success in Hollywood over the past 20 years, Nicotero still considers Savini the mentor who taught him the nuts and bolts of makeup effects, how to make zombies, and most importantly, how to heighten the effectiveness of gags: To illustrate, Nicotero points to the hobbling gag he did for *Misery*. "That scene's all about misdirection," he says. "James Caan is lying in the bed with fake legs rigged to break at the ankle. His real legs go through two little holes in the mattress. And when Kathy Bates lifts the sledgehammer, you can see that it's not easy for her to lift that thing up. You know it's not a rubber sledgehammer. That's the reason the gag sells."

After his apprenticeship with Savini and a brief stint working on *Aliens* with Stan Winston's company, Nicotero branched out on his own. On one of his first gigs, Sam Raimi's *Evil Dead 2*, he worked with Robert Kurtzman and Howard Berger (the K and B of KNB) and they decided to form their own company. Kurtzman left KNB in 2003, but the early days of the company are chockablock with low-budget shockers with titles like *Dr. Hackenstein*. KNB catapulted out of the horror ghetto with *Dances With Wolves*, for which they designed and built 22 animatronic and dummy buffalo. "I was terrified because I thought that would be the biggest film we ever did," says Nicotero. "The company was only in its third year and I was paranoid, thinking, 'Oh, man, I hope we didn't peak already.'"

*Now comes the blood. It's no secret formula like KFC's blend of 11 herbs and spices. It's just a mix of powdered food coloring and a*



**KILL BILL—VOL. 1**  
"Quentin wanted to slice the top of Liu's head off without using CGI. I love those challenges."

drop of detergent. If you want to make a real fleshy wound, try the skin from store-bought chicken breast and let it flop around. If you want to mix in some pus, mix yellow food coloring and K-Y jelly. Dentures are then applied. The gums should be black because the skin is supposed to be dead. Then come the contact lenses, which should be cloudy and bloodshot. Finally, a special mouth rinse is gargled to make the tongue and the rest of the inside of the mouth black. You don't want any signs of live pink tissue on your zombie. You want him to look as dead as you possibly can.

**T**HE HEADQUARTERS OF KNB EFX IS IN AN industrial section of Van Nuys, Calif. It's a neighborhood of auto body shops and marble and tile outlets. The hangar-size workshop is 21,000 square feet and it's a bit like the North Pole—if the North Pole were manned by elves making severed heads and limbs instead of toys. In the mold-making area, casts are being made for a remake of *The Hills Have Eyes*. In another cul-de-sac, a fake arm is being sculpted to be sliced off at a future date. There are werewolf costumes hanging from clothes racks and radio-controlled Minotaur heads for *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. It's exactly the office a 12-year-old kid dreams he'll have when he grows up.

Upstairs, in Nicotero's office, there's an air of calm before the storm. It's just weeks before *Land of the Dead* will open, and Nicotero sits in front of his computer to show off some of the zombie scenes he's come up with for the film. He cues up one where a zombie gets its head shot off. As the head blows apart like a ripe honeydew and a fusillade of pulpy bits spray out in every direction, Nicotero starts to make sound effects with his mouth. He has no idea he's doing this. He plays the scene over and over in slow motion, and out of his mouth comes something that sounds like *Bzzzzhpfffhh!* "Isn't that awesome?!" he asks. "Look at all that stuff that comes out! We used watermelon and cottage cheese." He plays it again. "Mmmwwwwoooooww!"

Nicotero admits that he sometimes draws funny looks in restaurants when he's talking shop. "I've had meetings with producers and



**"We glued the actor's ear down, took a cast of it, and put a fake on top. That scene is all about context."**

directors in restaurants and I'll be like, 'Okay, so when the person gets their head cut off...' and a woman at the next table will be gasping in horror." Robert Rodriguez, who's hired Nicotero on all of his films since 1995's *Four Rooms*, recalls a similar incident while prepping *Sin City*. Nicotero had made a bunch of mock-up heads for the character Yellow Bastard, and he drove to meet Rodriguez in the parking lot of the House of Blues in L.A., where Rodriguez had just finished a gig playing guitar. "Greg pops open the trunk and there's a line of plaster Bastard heads," says Rodriguez. "One passerby did a triple take when he saw us checking out a bunch of weird heads."

Nicotero has worked with Quentin Tarantino for nearly 15 years. On *Reservoir Dogs*, Nicotero rigged the infamous scene where Michael Madsen slices off a cop's ear. For *Pulp Fiction*, in addition to the Uma Thurman needle bit, Nicotero sprinkled all the brain matter in a scene where Samuel L. Jackson and John Travolta accidentally blow off a hostage's head in the backseat of their car. Yet the most epic makeup effects KNB has done for Tarantino were on *Kill Bill*—in particular, the House of Blue Leaves sequence, which had Thurman taking on dozens of sword-wielding assassins. By the end of the battle, Tarantino had used up every drop of the 400 gallons of blood KNB brought to the set in China.

When asked why he uses KNB instead of higher-profile legends like Rick Baker and Stan Winston, Tarantino says, "Those guys are great artists, but my relationship is with Greg and Howard. One, they're fantastic. And two, it's just fun to make movies with your friends." Tarantino considers the gag Nicotero came up with where Lucy Liu's head is sliced open like the lid of a jar "absolute genius." "The trickery involved in it is astounding," he says. "I think it's one of Greg's favorite gags, too." Actually, as a memento of the scene, Nicotero keeps a bust of Lucy Liu's scalped head in a glass case in the KNB lobby—a typically macabre sort of welcome sign to visitors.

Back in his office, Nicotero studies the posters for *Land of the Dead* that just arrived. He's unhappy that KNB isn't listed in the credits. But the disappointment lasts for only a couple of minutes before his giddiness kicks back in. There's one last zombie scene he's itching to share. "This gag is the one most people freak out over," he says. "When George saw this even *he* said 'It's over the top.'"

Nicotero swivels his chair over to his computer and clicks the mouse. On-screen, a zombie literally reaches its fist into a guy's mouth and pulls his throat out. When it ends, Nicotero just stares at the computer and starts cracking up. "Isn't that awesome?! He pulls his whole esophagus out! I mean, why wouldn't he? He's a zombie! That's what he does!" A few seconds later, Nicotero's hand reaches for the mouse like a reflex. "Wanna see it again?" ■

## Quentin Tarantino's Top 5 Zombie Movies



"You've got to start with **Night of the Living Dead** and **Dawn of the Dead**. I'd probably reverse those

if I had to put them in order, but you can't. They're so great that you can't pick one over the

other. You've got to say them both, all right? And after that would be **Shaun of the Dead**.

Then Lucio Fulci's **Zombie**. So I got one more left, right?



Now they're all kind of fighting it out. Greg would go nuts if I said this, but I actually think...I was gonna say the remake of **Dawn of the Dead**. He hated it so much. But I'm gonna take that back. I think **Re-Animator** qualifies as a zombie movie and I'd put **Re-Animator** as number five.

However, the opening 10 minutes of the *Dawn of the Dead* remake is as good as anything I've seen in years."

