



Legendary effects guru GREG NICOTERO peels back the latex, foam and blood gel to give us a glimpse behind KNB's spectacular work on Alexander Aja's remake of *THE HILLS HAVE EYES*.

MAN MADE MONSTERS

by Jovanka Vuckovic

With an eighteen-year pedigree in the genre, it's safe to say that KNB EFX Group are effects masters. The company (whose name is comprised of the first letters of the last names of its three founding partners – Robert Kurtzman, Greg Nicotero and Howard Berger) has built a name for itself making practical effects and makeup so spectacular the work almost becomes a character in the films it's featured in. We'll forgive a lacklustre sequel like *Bride of Re-Animator* solely on the basis of its outrageously entertaining effects work, and champion movies like *From Dusk Till Dawn* because the gore helps the film hit its mark, as is the case with their most recent job, Alexander Aja's remake of *The Hills Have Eyes*.

KNB – which is now effectively NB after Kurtzman bowed out a few years back – got its start on Scotty Spiegel's *Intruder* (RM#48) back in 1989, and before long was taking up the practical effects duties for scores of genre films, notably *Army of Darkness*, *In the Mouth of Madness*, *Scream*, *Ravenous*, *Bubba Ho-Tep*, *Cabin Fever*, the *House of Wax* remake, *Land of the Dead* (which features Nicotero as second unit director on the

gore pick-up shots), *Hostel*, the entire *Masters of Horror* series (RM#50) and, of course, *The Hills Have Eyes*.

If that isn't enough proof that the KNB crew are a horror director's go-to men when the need for bleed strikes, the company will also be heading up the practical work on Quentin Tarantino and Robert Rodriguez's upcoming drive-in throwback *Grindhouse* (2007). They've also adeptly handled effects work on an impressive resume of cult, fantasy and sci-fi films like *Reservoir Dogs*, the *Kill Bill* movies, *Sin City*, *Serenity* and *The Chronicles of Narnia*, but a lifelong interest in horror keeps them coming back to black (Nicotero's first gig – where he befriended Berger – was on George Romero's *Day of the Dead*, as assistant to Tom Savini).

With that kind of experience, it's no surprise KNB's grisly work in Aja's hyper-violent take on Wes Craven's 1977 survivalist vehicle turned out as impressive and believable as it did.

Nicotero wipes his hands clean for a sit down with *Rue Morgue* to discuss KNB's approach to remaking the mutants in *The Hills Have Eyes*, as well as his thoughts on the rampant Hollywood remake phenomenon.

From a makeup standpoint, how did you approach remaking The Hills Have Eyes?

The whole subtext of the film was that there was a group of people living in New Mexico during the '40s, '50s and '60s that refused to leave, it was basically their home. Whether the government was doing nuclear testing there or not, they didn't care, they wanted to stay. So the whole idea of the mutants was that they weren't just feral creatures, they were actually mutated by radiation. There was a lot of talk initially about having Michael Berryman do a cameo because he's so

instantly recognizable and tied to the film, so when we were designing Pluto's makeup we knew that people were gonna go, "Hey, that doesn't look anything like Michael Berryman!" So it was certainly a challenge, but the reality was that we were going for much more of an innocent Sloth from *The Goonies* look.

How much input did you get from Aja?

We started with Photoshop design work based on the descriptions in the script and meeting with Alex and [*Hills'* co-writer] Grégory Levasseur.

Scott Patton, who's an amazing artist that works here, did all the Photoshop art and from there we designed full-size maquettes of each character. There was a point when Dimension was making the film and dropped it before Fox picked it up, and there were six weeks where we didn't know who was going to make the movie so we took advantage of that time and refined the sculptures. By the time Alex and Grégory came in they would actually be able to look at their characters in full-size painted clay with hair on them. It was essential that they were around for that design phase.

"The whole idea of the mutants was that they weren't just feral creatures, they were actually mutated by radiation." Greg Nicotero

Were you referencing any bona fide radiation-related mutation photos when you were designing the mutants?

Alex and Grégory had done quite a bit of research. Robert Joy's makeup, for example – he plays Lizard in the script – was described as having weird clawed hands and a cleft palate, and we took that further by adding a weird sunburn kind of flakiness to his skin because his name was Lizard. We also decided to give the Pluto character soft, baby-like mohair instead of coarse hair, to sort of indicate he wasn't quite finished forming. But we didn't utilize photos of real mutation; sometimes I find that a bit distasteful to use photos of people who were unfortunate enough to be genetically malformed. Most of it was taken from conceptual ideas as they were described in the script.

How much of the makeup was done practically and in post?

When we were designing all of the characters, the first thing that we talked about with Ruby's character – the little girl – was that they wanted her eyes to be spaced out unnaturally and offset. So we said, "Listen guys, there's no way that you're going to get an appliance that's gonna look realistic, that's gonna have blink and movement." Our approach to that was that it should be done with the computer. They shot Laura, the actress, and spread her eyes apart in post. There were two kids in a nursery that were also done with computer but the rest of the family was done practically.

Despite the fact that you worked on it and it turned out quite well, do you feel this movie really needed to be made?

Well, the remake scenario is such a touchy subject. There are a lot of films that I feel should not be remade and then there are films that I feel can be updated and given a different flair. Remaking *Psycho*, I thought, was completely ridiculous, and I wasn't a huge fan of the *Dawn of*

the *Dead* remake only because I love George Romero – he's one of my oldest and dearest friends. I love that movie, it was seminal to my existence in terms of growing up watching that movie and [it] inspiring me. But then you turn around and look at Carpenter's *The Thing* and that movie also inspired a generation of horror fans and makeup effects guys, and that's of course a remake of the Howard Hawkes movie. So I can't give you a blanket statement on remakes being a bad or good idea because remakes for me are tremendously personal and that's what makes it really difficult to forgive some of them.

But with regards to The Hills Have Eyes, now that seemed like a film that could definitely be improved upon.

I agree, the original had such a cult following [but] it wasn't necessarily a big mainstream hit. I think that Alex did a great job rethinking *Hills*, the actors are great and the updated story – although much more violent than its predecessor – works well today.

Why do you think there's so much interest in remaking horror films right now?

It's a tried and true formula, it's name recogni-

tion. I think that's why the *Dawn of the Dead* remake made more money than *Land of the Dead*, because *Land* didn't have the name recognition of something that was on video shelves for years that kids could see or older people like us can say, "Oh I saw that movie when I was a little kid and I wanna go check out what they did with the remake." Also, let's face it, the film industry is about making money. It's very rarely about people with a vision who have this amazing story they want to tell, it's about how much money your movie made the opening weekend.

What keeps bringing you back to horror after all these years?

I've always loved horror films since I was a little kid. I used to go see so many films that would scare the hell out of me [so] that I couldn't sleep. The adrenaline rush from that terror was so intoxicating. I mean, the first time I saw *Jaws* I remember thinking, "How did they do that?"

Well, now it's your turn to scare the hell out of a generation of kids.

And I have to say that it warms my heart that Howard and I have been able to leave our mark on the horror legacy. ☠

