Like anyone raising his child, Don Mancini knows it helps to have a sense of humor.

By MICHAEL ROWE

It's an early evening in late summer in London's Soho district, and Don Mancini, writer and director of Seed of Chucky (opening November 12 from Rogue Pictures), is still on a wild ride.

Seed's principal photography in Romania wrapped in June, and the full-on absorption that had possessed Mancini throughout the long and occasionally difficult shoot hasn't left him much peace. This evening, after a full day of postproduction at the De Lane Lea facility on Dean Street, 10 minutes from his Covent Garden flat, Mancini is reclining in a chair in his office, an ever-present bottle of water close at hand. He's wearing his standard uniform of faded blue jeans and a white wife-beater T-shirt. If he's tense, or tired, it doesn't show beneath the mixture of affable good humor and sleepy gravitas that is Mancini's trademark.
This writer spent a good part of summer 1998 on the Toronto set of Bride of Chucky with Mancini and producers Corey Sienega and David Kirschner. If the Mancini of 1998 was younger and breezier, though no less involved in the process of bringing his vision to the screen for his relative youth, the 2004 incarnation is slightly older and wiser, and perhaps braver as well.

Seed marks his directorial debut, after all, and Mancini has elected to make it a film that reinvents something he himself invented—not the original premise of Child's Play so much as the glittering camp extravaganza that was Bride of Chucky. Bride not only rejuvenated the Child's Play franchise by introducing Tiffany, Chucky's trailer-trash moll voiced by Jennifer Tilly, but opened the door to an extended family of plot possibilities. In Seed, Mancini pushes the door wider, envisioning a story expansive enough to encompass not only the goriest Chucky mayhem yet, but also to ask poignant, disturbing and oddly moving questions about the nature of family—what it means to the living, the dead and those in between.

FANGORIA: After creating the Child's Play franchise and writing all of the movies including this one, you're on the threshold of the release of your directorial debut. How does it feel?

DON MANCINI: It feels good, when I'm not exhausted, which is never.[Laughs] I'll be able to answer that question in a week and a half when we have our test screening. It will either be a great relief, or a horrible sense of panic.

FANG: But how do you feel about the film at this moment? Are you proud of it? Do you like it?

MANCINI: I do, but I'm so close to it. I haven't had a day away from it since October of last year, literally, so I have no objectivity at all. The studio seems happy, Dave and Corey seem happy. It's difficult for me to watch it and not see every fault.

FANG: What's most striking about this film is that there's a great deal going on besides the horror, and even the comedy. There are very poignant social and familial dynamics which are very affecting—namely the relationship between Chucky and Tiffany and their son Glen, and how in a weird way they're very "real," killer dolls notwithstanding.

MANCINI: That aspect of the movie is working very well, and is definitively satisfying to me. There's something almost subversive about that. Its treatment of the "dysfunctional family dynamics" and domestic violence, even—the fact that they're dolls allows you some distance from those themes. If we were doing this film with actual human beings, the sadness of it would be a little overwhelming. But given that they're dolls, you can laugh a little. That's my goal, and I hope

I'm on target with that.

FANG: You're not the young man you were when you wrote Child's Play, and Bride of Chucky contained a lot of very funny things. Seed seems to be a step into a deeper, and maybe darker, place.

Is this a further manifestation of your growth as a man, and as a writer?

MANCINI: That's a big question you've asked there. Certainly as a writer I asked more of myself with this script than with the last one, but I didn't want to do exactly the same thing. In my opinion, the script is more ambitious than Bride of Chucky was. There are the character dynamics amongst the dolls, but there's also a satirical look at Hollywood. The notion, for instance, of Jennifer Tilly playing herself has a sort of hall-of-mirrors quality—the notion of Jennifer Tilly and Tiffany playing opposite each other. [Laughs] There were a lot of balls to be juggled. I wanted to stretch myself as a creator of comedy, especially satirical comedy.

FANG: And as a director?

MANCINI: This was my first time out other than having directed some 2nd unit on Bride. In that sense, these are my first steps, so I don't think this represents my maturation as a filmmaker.

FANG: But there are themes you explore: abusive family relationships, gender roles and the confusion they bring. Glen—unlike Chucky and Tiffany, who are nearly caricatures of masculinity and femininity—is, after all, born without any sense of being male or female. Does your curiosity about tackling these issues have to do with you being an older man today than you were when you wrote Child's Play?

MANCINI: Absolutely. Being an older man—God, I don't want to describe myself

Unlike stars Redman and Jennifer Tilly, writer/director Don Mancini (right) didn't have much time to sleep on Seed of Chucky.
as an older man! [Laughs] But with maturity comes a comfort with yourself. The movie is autobiographical in some ways. Certainly as a gay man, I had a very contentious relationship with my father that I would say is reflected, in a satirical, parodying way, in Chucky's relationship with Glen. Chucky is very conservative, chauvinistic male figure. And Napoleonic, too, because he's in this little body. For him to have a child who is the opposite of him, a child who is very sweet and innocent, unthreatening, and unsure of his own gender and sexuality...

When I first presented [this project] to Universal, they indicated that they would be more receptive to going the traditional route, which would be to have Glen be basically another Chucky—another doll that

The deadly doll family gives John Waters more to worry about than the ratings board ever did.

would go around killing people. And I thought, what's so interesting about that? [Laughs] It was obvious that it could go much further in terms of character and story by having Glen be the opposite, as well as going into the whole issue of family relationships, which are always fraught with that sort of tension. Children are rarely carbon copies of their parents, and they tend to want to rebel, and defy their parents' expectations. I always wanted the relationship between Chucky and Tiffany and Glen to be a parody of domestic dramas like Kramer vs. Kramer or Ordinary People. There's a universality about that aspect of the story, the family story.

FANG: When you were writing Glen, did you think of him in any way as a gay kid, or did you stay focused on the fact that he is gender-confused?

MANCINI: I wouldn't say that I was thinking of him exactly as gay, because he's written as a presexual child for whom those issues have not yet arisen in life. I didn't think of him as gay so much as of a "third sex." He's not effeminate, he's just open to everything. There's a scene in the movie where they're having an argument, and Tiffany is shouting, "I want a girl!" and Chucky's shouting, "I want a boy!" and Glen comes into frame and says, "You're tearing me apart! What about what I want?" And they say, "Well, what do you want?" And Glen says, "I don't know. Sometimes I feel like a boy, and sometimes I feel like a girl." He embodies both of the stereotypical traits: masculinity is thought of as soft and passive. He has that. And masculinity is defined as harder and more assertive. And he asks, "Why can't I be both?" And that's a very modern question. And it's funny to see that dilemma played out in a family of dolls.

FANG: Do you think people have come to expect more from the genre than mere slash and bite, or comedy? And does Seed, with its complexity, provide that?

MANCINI: I don't know if [audiences] do or not. Certainly [the Texas Chainsaw Massacre and Dawn of the Dead remakes] were very successful, and those films were violent assaults on the audience while being light on the character aspects. I don't know—audiences really embraced that, and they embraced it in Freddy vs. Jason, which most people would agree is not a character-based film.

I believe audiences want different things from different movies. They're very

Nobody puts Tiffany in a corner...and lives to tell about it.

Kids just can't be counted on to put their toys away neatly...
happy to get a violent assault. It’s been five or six years since Bride of Chucky and the Scream movies. Texas Chainsaw Massacre is a really harrowing kind of film—one of the most sadistic movies I’ve ever seen. But as to your question, Seed of Chucky, and the Chucky franchise, is a very different animal. It’s comedy/horror and not intended to be harrowing in that way at all, but it’s certainly violent. I would say that Seed is the goriest of all of them. And I did that intentionally, because I felt we’d gone to a place with a certain stylized violence in Bride. I wanted to do something new, and this one lays on the blood and the gore a bit more than the other ones.

FANG: Was there anything in particular that led you in this direction?
MANCINI: You get a certain quota of the fantastic with just the dolls themselves. In a film like Texas Chainsaw, your quota of the fantastic is the violence. With Chucky, you have it right off the bat, and you can be more “implied” with the bloodshed. I felt we’d taken that slyness to the limit, and I wanted to give the audience something different. It’s pretty gory, but I would liken it more to a film like Re-Animator or Evil Dead II, in that it’s intended to take your breath away with the violence and the gore, then make you laugh. It’s all about context.

FANG: Did you attempt to invest the mayhem with any deeper meaning?
MANCINI: In Bride, the violence was all used as a metaphor for the steps in a romantic relationship. In this movie, the violence is metaphorically used to illustrate the dynamics of a family breaking down. In real life, a mother and father may fight over their kid with regards to what his profession will be, or what school activities he will pursue. In Seed, we use violence as a metaphor for that universal predicament. That’s the question they wrestle over: “Is our kid going to follow in the family footsteps and be a murderer?” To me, that’s just an inherently comic and disturbing question. As I said before, you couldn’t do that with the real story of a real little kid. It would be very disturbing, shocking and potentially offensive in a non-artistic way.

FANG: How protective are you of Chucky after all these years? What’s your relationship with this character? Do you think in terms of Chucky’s well-being?
MANCINI: Yes, I do. I think in terms of developing his character and not giving the audience the same things again and again. This, in fact, was an offense I was guilty of in Child’s Play 2 and 3. Those movies were in stasis, in a way, and may have been uninteresting. But with Bride—again, perhaps because I was older, and more comfortable with myself as a person, and more confident as a writer—I was able to say, “If we’re going to do this again, we’ve got to actually treat him as a character.” Again, I was intent on developing his personality and giving the viewers a genuine next chapter. It isn’t like a James Bond serial, in the sense that every time you see a 007 movie, the character is the same. I would say that’s true of Freddy and Jason as well, and it works for them. But with Chucky, I wanted to do something different, and with the introduction of Tiffany, we were able to show another side of him that we hadn’t seen. Now, the introduction of Glen reveals yet another side.

FANG: Jennifer Tilly is so identified with the franchise at this point that all you have to do is say “Chucky” and someone says “Bride of Chucky” rather than, necessarily, “Child’s Play.”
MANCINI: Jennifer and I have very similar tastes in what we find funny and outrageous. I would say that’s true of David and Corey as well—we’re all very much in accord on the outrageousness. You know I wrote Bride of Chucky for Jennifer, but had not met her while I was writing it. In later years, we became friends. When I was writing Seed of Chucky, I knew I had to have her back as Tiffany. I felt she was such a successful physical presence, and a great comedienne, and that’s one of the things people liked about Bride of Chucky. I felt that people might miss that in Seed if she was only incarnated in the voice of the
doll. I had to find a way to have her in the movie physically.

When putting these movies together, you start out in certain places: I knew I wanted to do the family dynamic, and that would be the introduction to the child born at the end of Bride. The second question was, "Who are the human characters that the dolls interact with, and menace? And who are the human characters whose situation the dolls mirror?" In Bride you had the Jesse and Jade characters who were pretty straightforward, and even intentionally a little bland—the standard horror-genre teenaged hero and heroine. I don't mean to comment on the actors' performances—they were really good. But they were intentionally conceived to be very straightforward so that Chucky and Tiffany's relationship would be thrown into relief.

FANG: Was there any temptation, in the writing of Seed, to do something similar?

MANCINI: We could have done that. We could have deposited Chucky, Tiffany and Glen into a family situation where the family would have been very generic and straightforward. But we already did that with Bride. And in fact, in some of my early attempts to work out the story of Seed, it was exactly that. But I realized that I had already gone down that road. Then I thought, "What about having Jennifer play herself, and she becomes the human touchstone that the dolls invade?" That seemed like the way to go, because Jennifer Tilly is anything but a straightforward, generic horror figure. She's naturally stylized and outrageous, and I realized that's what I wanted to do.

FANG: Were you aware of stepping into a tradition by setting Seed in Hollywood and exploring the "film-within-a-film" motif?

MANCINI: Certainly it has been done in other movies, even other horror movies—Wes Craven did it in New Nightmare and Scream 3. I've always found that a fascinating device, but I had never seen it done in a way that was completely irreverent to itself. Quite the contrary, in fact. New Nightmare, for instance, was quite reverential to its own franchise, and toward the people involved with it. I felt it would be fresh and funny to go in the opposite direction. Hence, you have Jennifer Tilly playing herself moaning and bitching that her career has reached such a nadir that she's gone from being an Oscar nominee to playing opposite a doll. So the movie is completely satirical about its own history—in the film, people refer to the Chucky franchise as "cheesecake" and they constantly condescend to it.

It's an original take to doing a film within a film. It was as much influenced by old I Love Lucy episodes as it was by New Nightmare. [Laughs] You know, the episodes set in Hollywood, with real celebrities playing themselves, and Lucy is completely gagged and dazzled by being in their midst and wants to be a star herself? I thought it would be so funny to put the dolls in the midst of that, and have Tiffany be Jennifer Tilly's number-one fan. To me, that's much funnier than if Tiffany had been Julia Roberts or Nicole Kidman's number-one fan. [laughs] The fact that it's Jennifer Tilly is, to me, very funny. I hope others feel that way too.

FANG: Were you in any way working out any ambivalent feelings you might have had about Hollywood when you wrote this movie, or are you at peace with Hollywood, metaphorically?

MANCINI: I wouldn't say I was working out anything. The "Hollywood" aspect is fairly minimal. It's the family dynamic that's at the forefront of the story. So no, I wasn't working out anything other than, as the creator, writer and now director of this series, having experienced people's condescension toward it. I've gone from being insulted or depressed by the condescension to being amused by it. Maybe this was also part of maturing as a person and a writer, but I just don't take it that seriously anymore.