

# John Lafia Pulls Some Strings

By MARC SHAPIRO

*...And jumps from screenwriter to director with "Child's Play 2," where he finds that possessed killer dolls are people too.*

**L**et's get one thing straight here, folks: Chucky is a puppet. He's a Kevin Yagher creation. He is not a flesh and blood actor. But from the way director John Lafia handled his pint-sized charge on the *Child's Play 2* set, you'd swear that Chucky was a member in good standing with the Screen Actors Guild.

"It got to the point where I began to treat Chucky like another actor," recalls Lafia. "We'd be doing a scene, and I would get real excited and say, 'Kark his ass, Chucky! Kill him, Chucky!' It was good for a laugh, but it also added to the adrenaline of the situation to get down in Chucky's face and yell, 'Now hate him, Chucky!' I delighted in pretending he was real."

The director is reveling in the experience during a midmorning conversation in his Los Angeles apartment. He is a scant few days from tying the knot with the lovely Beverly Hong. His future in-laws are on their way over for a prenuptial visit. Needless to say, he's nervous. But he's not too wrapped up in wedding jitters to relish his turn as Chucky's master.

**"By the time we got to the end, Alex Vincent was more bored with Chucky than afraid of him."**

Lafia was in on the *Child's Play* business from the beginning, having written the draft of the script that ultimately got the long-dormant project greenlighted in 1987. But Lafia, who would go on to direct the quirky noir comedy *The Blue Iguana*, had more than scripting participation on his mind.

"From the start, I had been pumping the producers to let me direct *Child's Play*," Lafia remembers. "I had not directed a feature at that point, but I had done a good job of convincing people that I could. The *Child's Play* people were too nervous about my lack of feature directing credits [though he had helmed a few rock videos] to let me do it, but they did say that if the first film was successful and there was a sequel, they wanted me to direct it."

"Well, *Child's Play* came out and was an immediate hit. True to their word, I received a call the weekend after it opened asking if I was still interested in directing a sequel. I said, 'What do you think?' and we



were in business."

Lafia's assessment of his directing style begins and ends with "methodical and thought-out. When I'm able to see the whole movie in my mind before I shoot it, I can sleep at night. When I can't do that, it's panic time."

The director avoided this uncertainty by collaborating with screenwriter Don Mancini to plot out a maximum amount of scares. He worked closely with Kevin Yagher in thrashing out a new and improved Chucky look. A book of sketches he produces during the interview indicates that *Child's Play 2* was storyboarded to death.

Most importantly, Lafia took a long look at the first *Child's Play*, and it was there that he found the clues to building better scares in the sequel.

"Obviously, the first film was very effective," Lafia explains. "But certain areas could have been enhanced. Visually, it just wasn't as fluid as I would have liked, and the overall design was a little flat for my tastes. Chucky's design could have been better. When they had the shots of the little person in a suit, that just blew it for me. Those shots didn't have the magic and believability I would have liked. Don't get me wrong, the first film worked really well on a lot of levels. It's just that while looking at it again, I saw many things that I wanted to do differently."

As the countdown to the first day of filming drew closer, Lafia was faced with the inevitable question of how to keep *Child's Play 2* from falling victim to the sequel's curse of predictability. "Actually, I never felt I was going to have that problem," he shrugs. "I had a character whose personality and behavior were only touched on in the first film, and there was still more that could be done. We knew we could make the fact that Chucky is a doll for all it was worth. Chucky could kill somebody, just sit down next to the body, and people would come in and not realize that the killer was sitting right next to them. We knew we could do things with Chucky that we couldn't do with another villain, and we never felt we were in any danger of repeating the first film."

Lafia's initial few days on *Child's Play 2* were not the stuff that colorful set visits are made of; they involved a basic overhead crane shot and some "walk from here to there" coverage at an elementary school. The slow start, however, was deliberate. "People need time to warm up and work with each other,



Ever have one of those days when you just can't get a good?

which is why I always start my films with the simple things. I would have been crazy to load myself down with lots of effects shots during the first couple of days."

The movie's 16-week shooting schedule was an exercise in peaks and valleys. "Some days, everything would work fine," Lafia offers. "Then there were the days when Chucky would spaz out or Alex [Vincent] would freak out."

"The hardest scenes for me to direct were undoubtedly the ones in which Chucky and Alex are together," he continues. "You're in a situation where you've got an 8-year-old boy trying to act opposite a puppet being operated by 15 people. Getting Alex to repeat specific actions many times always took a lot of work. It was easier when I was working with the adult actors, because they were better able to sell the doll's actions."

A scene that's sure to make Lafia's sample reel is one in which Andy's foster sister Kyle (Christine Elise) enters her house, climbs a flight of stairs to the bedroom, finds her mother dead and is suddenly attacked by a crazed Chucky.

"Just getting Chucky to rise out of the sheets was very involving," Lafia elaborates. "I had to coordinate the spring-loaded contraption that ripped the sheets while the operators pushed Chucky through them out of frame. But I was real happy with what led up to that shot. It was essentially 10 minutes of very intricate staging and pacing with very little dialogue. We did this slow build from outside, then into the house to that long walk up the stairs, and then down the hall into the bedroom. What I liked best about that scene is that when you look at it as a whole, it plays as being very real."

Another moment that Lafia remembers fondly, the climactic confrontation between Alex and Chucky in the Good Guy factory, is one that started out as a potentially major problem. "Shooting the final scenes was like pulling teeth," he groans. "After going through an entire movie of this kid being scared and scared and scared, we were faced with the challenge of trying to get one monster scare out of him. The problem was that Alex had been in the first *Child's Play*.

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Lafia and Chucky creator Kevin  
Yagher collaborated on the killer  
doll's reaction shots.



Director Lafia  
auditioned hun-  
dreds of Good  
Guys before  
choosing the  
perfect Chucky.



and had gotten used to being around the doll. By the time we got to the end of this shoot, he was more bored with Chucky than afraid of him."

But a resourceful Lafia, relying on odd angles and dolling the camera up close to Vincent's face to achieve the look of fear, managed to frighten the young actor with a variety of improvised actions. "At one point I got a bull-horn, put it about an inch from his face and started screaming. 'He's coming! He's here!' to freak him out," Lafia recalls. "In a couple of scenes where he had to jump in fright, I had people hidden with bottles that they would break at the right moment. The kid was tough and he gave a good performance. All I had to do was to keep reminding him to be scared."

Most of the doll footage was shot during a month's worth of scaled-down filming supervised by Lafia and Yagher. "Originally, I had hoped that Kevin would be able to direct most of the second unit Chucky material, and I wouldn't have to worry about it. But what we found as we went along was that Chucky was an actor, and we needed to get actions out of him that were tied in to what the other actors were doing. The things I

had in mind were so specific that, unless I shot the scenes with the real actors first, it was going to be very hard to get the Chucky shots to match.

"So we postponed a great deal of the second unit filming until the end of the shoot, when Kevin and I could both be there. We would look at the first unit film that was already cut, and then figure out what we needed Chucky to do."

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Prior to *Child's Play 2*, Lafia had made his horror mark on the small screen with the "Reaper" episode of *Monsters*. "I was real excited about doing it because it was based on a Robert Bloch story, and I've always been a big fan of his," Lafia enthuses. "But I was very nervous about how it was going to turn out, so I did it under a pseudonym [Jean Patenaude]. That first show

was important to me because, as I was growing up, I always felt subconsciously that I had a horrific purpose to my life, and at all came to the surface with that episode."

This bent toward creating terror continued to creatively fester as Lafia plunged into two installments of *Freddy's Nightmare*, *Rebel Without a Car*, and the director's favorite, "Love Stinks," which features Jeffrey [ReAnimator] Combs and witnessed Lafia's introduction to major-league bloodletting.

"I had never done anything with heavy gore before and, in this episode, the producers were really goading me to get as explicit as I could with the show," the director reveals. "There was a scene where Jeffrey is grinding up these human fingers, but the machine was malfunctioning and this finger kept popping up. It looked utterly ridiculous, but I decided to leave it alone and shoot it that way, and it turned out to be perfectly in keeping with the episode's tone. It was supergross, but also very funny."

Another Lafia project that promised to combine horror and humor was his abortive attempt at a sequel to *An American Werewolf in London*, titled *An American Werewolf in Paris*. Lafia embellishes, "I met with John Landis

and the people at Polygram (who co-owned Werewolf with Landis) and they said, 'OK, write a script and we'll see if we can make it.' I wrote the screenplay, gave it to the Polygram people, went off to do Child's Play 2 and never heard from them. Finally I called, and they told me they weren't crazy about the script and never showed it to Landis. So, as far as I know, Landis has never seen it."

The storyline for *An American Werewolf in Paris* focused on a Yankee schoolteacher in the French city who holds forth on good and evil in a class he teaches. He is bitten by a lycanthrope and goes through the expected changes; hot on his trail is the doctor who survived the first film, who has been working on a werewolf serum. "It was kind of a metaphor for things like AIDS and cancer," Lafia explains. "It had the same attitude as the first film, along with plenty of really scary stuff. As it stands now it will most likely never be made, which is too bad. Maybe I'll retite it and call it *The Hounding VII: The Intelligent Version*," he laughs.

The fifth of 10 children, John Lafia was dead set on a filmmaking occupation from a young age. "It's not something I stumbled into," he maintains. "I read a lot of horror as a kid, made models of monsters and loved movies in general. By the time I got to high school I was obsessed. I would watch events and think about how they would look if I filmed them."

Following a short stint at UC Santa Barbara, Lafia took his obsession to UCLA and its prestigious film program. Unfortunately, what he found there was very discouraging. "It was depressing. It seemed like everybody wanted to be a director and nobody really knew how to go about it. It just seemed like I was wasting my time."

Lafia quit UCLA in 1980 and supported himself with such odd movie-related jobs as an extra, mailroom clerk, script reader and art director while continuing to pen

screenplays. An unproduced effort landed Lafia an agent and, in 1985, his screenplay *Black Glass* found a home at Atlantic Releasing.

"I was also going to direct that film and spent almost a year in preparation before the deal fell through," Lafia sighs. "But by then I had gotten the first *Child's Play* assignment, and then wrote and directed *The Blue Iguana*. That film got a good reception at Cannes, but didn't get the kind of release I had hoped for."

The same won't happen with *Child's Play 2*; Lafia jokes that the film's almost certain success will "give me the career I never had" and, less jokingly, claims that, "There's nothing like being involved in a financially successful movie to get people to want to hire you again." But he realizes that a *Chucky* blockbuster also has its downside.

"One thing that will almost certainly happen, which I don't necessarily want, is that this film is going to establish me as a horror director and nothing else. If you've done one thing well, people tend to think that's all you can do. And I suppose it's not helping my cause that the script I'm working on now is a horror/science fiction/action film. I'm trying real hard not to make it straight horror, but I just can't help it. At least it's not going to be like *Chucky*."

Lafia returns to the doll in question and the aesthetics of making it *Chucky's* show. "The movie is about *Chucky*: his looking as good as possible and how his presence affects the people around him. Nothing about this was easy because just about every scene involved some kind of effect. Then there was the difficulty of dealing with a puppet and trying to make it look and act like a living, breathing character and getting it to do things it really couldn't do. But I was determined to make this one-of-a-kind work. And I didn't care what it took."



The "Reaper" has a home to pick with two others in Lafia's pseudonymously-directed *Monsters* episode.

Unless there's a *Child's Play 3*, this may be the last *Chucky* show we'll need to caption.



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