

With the 20th anniversary of *The Boneyard* upon us, FX artist/filmmaker/author James Cummins recently agreed to share memories of his 1991 entrée into the world of directing with Fango. Though his baptism was fraught with the difficulties one would expect for someone making a low-budget movie for the first time, Cummins recalled the experience with his typical good humor and perspicacity. Neither of us could have known this would be the last time we would speak, as exactly two months later on December 1, he would die in his sleep at the age of just 51. To the best of my knowledge, this is the last interview he ever gave.

As a child, Cummins had been an accomplished artist with an innate drawing ability and a love of horror and science-fiction cinema. Like most budding artists of his generation, he was inspired by *Famous Monsters of Filmland* magazine, and

Intruder Within; his efforts caught the eye of *The Thing*'s Rob Bottin and line producer Erik Jensen, earning him a place on that crew.

Cummins subsequently moved on to key his own movie as makeup FX supervisor, Michael Laughlin's 1983 sci-fi curio *Strange Invaders* (though he subsequently removed his name). He followed this up with quality work on TV shows such as *The Hitchhiker* and the '80s *Twilight Zone* revival and films such as *House*, *Enemy Mine* and *Slumber Party Massacre II*. (The latter required that Cummins create a murderous guitar-weapon, an instrument he was particularly proud of.)

In the late '80s, Cummins abandoned FX and began developing *The Boneyard* with producer and close friend Richard F. Brophy. An outrageous monster picture in the anarchic tradition of *Re-Animator* and *Evil Dead II* and

BACK TO THE BONEYARD

By MICHAEL DOYLE

The late FX artist turned filmmaker James Cummins stocked his first feature with wild and crazy monsters.

through trial and error had doggedly begun teaching himself makeup and FX techniques. Once satisfied that he had acquired enough expertise, he began showing his portfolio around Los Angeles shops, leading to gigs with industry

giants like Stan Winston on *The Exterminator* and *Dead & Buried* and Tom Burman on *The Beast Within* and *Cat People*. Between these projects, Cummins also realized the Gigeresque monster for the 1981 *Alien-on-an-oil-rig* TV movie *The*

lensed in Statesville, North Carolina, it primarily takes place over one night in a dilapidated city morgue invaded by three ancient, childlike, cannibalistic Asian demons known as *kyoshi*. The undead tykes are intent on consuming the flesh of

a disparate group including Deborah Rose's portly psychic, *The Brain Eaters*' Ed Nelson as a grizzled cop and Norman Fell's ponytailed coroner.

Drawing inspiration from *Night of the Living Dead* and *Mr. Vampire*, Cummins sought to create a unique horror film that would be both disturbing and moving ("horror with a heart," he once called it).

"I HAD BEEN FOOLING AROUND WITH AN ILLUSTRATION OF A PREHISTORIC POODLE, AND THOUGHT IT WOULD MAKE A GREAT MONSTER."

Skillfully overcoming time and financial limitations, he created an eerie atmosphere and several gripping setpieces before loosing the reins in the last quarter for all-out insanity as Phyllis Diller's Miss Poopinplatz and her pampered poodle transform into Big Daddy Roth-like monsters. *The Boneyard* remains an impres-



The Boneyard is populated by lots of fleshy things too.

sive debut that displays Cummins' immense promise as a director—but sadly, that potential would never be truly fulfilled. After completing his second film, *Dark: 30*, Cummins contracted rheumatic fever, leading to two heart operations and the end of his directing career, as he could no longer secure insurance to work on a film set. Continuing to write spec screenplays—including one entitled *4Below* which sold to Joel Schumacher—he also (under the name J.T. Cummins) began self-publishing suspense, horror and fantasy fiction—including the novel *Winstrom*, based on an unrealized film project—exclusively for the digital market.

Cummins was a versatile, disciplined artist and a passionate lover of the macabre. Even though horror doesn't often promote a positive or optimistic message about humanity, the same cannot be said of him. He was an incredibly caring and

talented man whose gentle humor and generosity of spirit touched the lives of all those fortunate to have encountered him. It was a pleasure to know him, but it was a privilege to be his friend.

FANGORIA: How did the idea for *The Boneyard* come to you?

JAMES CUMMINS: I had been fooling around with an illustration of a prehistoric poodle, and thought it would make a great monster for a fun horror movie. I literally wrote the script around that concept. By the way, the dog eventually cast as Floofsoms in *The Boneyard* is the same punk poodle that belonged to Elvira in *Elvira, Mistress of the Dark*.

FANG: Alice Cooper and Clu Gulager were originally up for roles. What happened?

CUMMINS: Alice's representative was so difficult that we finally gave up and cast Norman Fell against type. Richard knew Clu personally, so we considered him a lock. Unfortunately, when it came time to shoot, Clu was seriously ill, so we replaced him with Ed Nelson, who was great to work with. Ed was actually in the next town visiting family when we started in-

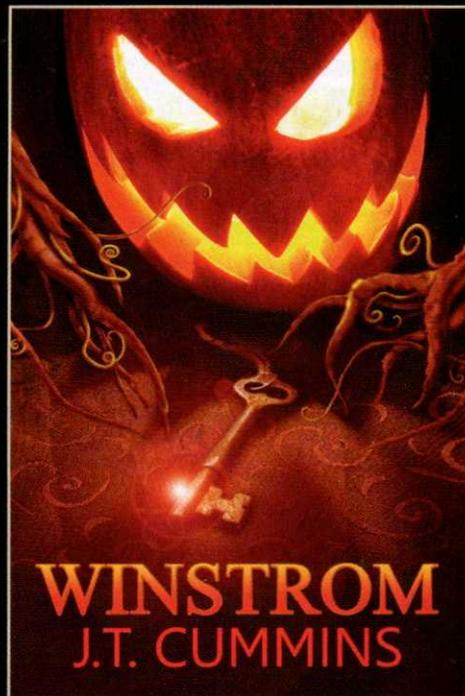


Phyllis Diller flipped her wig when she was cast in James Cummins' directorial debut.

quiring about casting him. Of course, we didn't know that at the time and neither did his agent, so when Ed returned home



Gone too soon, Cummins lived a productive life surrounded by monsters.



to New Orleans, he read the script right away and agreed to do the part, and two weeks later he boomeranged back to North Carolina. For him, it was an opportunity to not only extend his vacation, but get paid for it.

FANG: Was it arduous handling both directing and FX duties?

CUMMINS: Bill Corso was hired to oversee the effects based on my designs, and he brought such enthusiasm and talent to the project that I trusted him to execute them right. Not everything went off without a hitch, but I am eternally grateful to Bill for doing such a bang-up job on a wildly ambitious project with such a shoestring budget.

FANG: There are moments of grotesque tenderness in the film, namely in the scenes featuring the zombie children.

CUMMINS: My main concern was how to make the pathos readable to an audience. Since the ghost on the porch and the ghouls were kids, I relied on their child-like tendencies to make them relatable. Luckily, I had great musical assist from composer John Lee Whitener.

FANG: How did you get Phyllis Diller to
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