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No Horror Story

A primer on a prolific writer.

Written by Eric Butterman

Brian Helgeland began his career in the horror genre, a fertile field that helped his craft develop into the tragic dimensions of *Mystic River*. In 1988, with Scott Pierce, Helgeland's first produced script was *A Nightmare on Elm Street 4: The Dream Master*. His next projects were teleplays for the *Friday the 13th* series. His directing debut came with an episode of *Tales From the Crypt* in 1996. Helgeland looks at all of these scary projects as stepping stones to where he is today and doesn't consider it at all a step backward to have his latest writer-directorial feature be *The Order*, the story of a priest who must decipher unusual markings on the body of his deceased mentor.

Eric Butterman: You got your start in horror.

Brian Helgeland: As a kid I loved horror movies. It just always seemed to get me more than other films. A lot of people look down on the genre, which is unfortunate because it's incredibly cinematic. *The Order* was about doing a horror movie where we hopefully elevated it out of its genre. Horror suffers when filmmakers try to slum it and look down on it as a quick way to make a buck and not much more. The only way to make horror better is to respect the genre.

Being known for tight story structure, did you feel you could apply the same principles to a *Nightmare on Elm Street* that you could to an L.A. Confidential?

The key to successful horror is good structure, and that went with me to every other genre I ended up working on. The thing about horror films is the rules are so wide open that you can create your own rules for the world, but once the audience understands the rules, you're forced to stick to them or you lose them forever. Visually, horror is the perfect kind of world to be in and anyone can tell you that most films are guilty of not being visual enough.

Between *The Order* and *Conspiracy Theory*, you've shown an interest in material that the average person wouldn't know much about. How much is just natural curiosity here?

I'm naturally paranoid. For *Conspiracy Theory*, I did a lot of Internet research, looking at conspiracies and self-published magazines on the topic. I would play a game where I'd get the *New York Times*, read the headlines, and then put myself in a conspiracy mindset and try to relate the headlines. I like to make up worlds like that. Yeah, I'm a little weird, huh?

You have a talent for collaboration. You scripted two films with Dick Donner (*Assassins* and *Conspiracy Theory*) and two for Eastwood (*Blood Work* and *Mystic River*). What makes directors want to work with you multiple times and what keeps you coming back to writing other people's work even after becoming such an established director in your own right?

Conspiracy Theory is a good example because my original script was a darker story than what came to be. Donner and I got along creatively and always got along great personally, but that

didn't mean we always saw eye-to-eye on the product. There were always moments where I was coming to him and saying, "I think it has to be more this way and that way" and Dick would oblige me to a point . . . but not only to a point. There's a whole kind of misguided perspective that directors are trying to change scripts just because they can. It's not nearly so neat and clean as that. What happened with *Conspiracy Theory* is Dick took me aside and said, "I know there are things you and I don't agree with tonally," and he told me if I wanted it to be exactly as I wanted it then I had to become a director. He didn't mean this to be rude but to be helpful. He explained further that everyone sees a story differently, so how could what I put on the page be the same as what I have in my head unless I was running the show? That's when I backed off some and he offered to have me direct an episode of his show *Tales From the Crypt*.

Is *Conspiracy Theory* your favorite original script?

The reason *Conspiracy Theory* is my favorite film is not for the end product, but because I realized with Dick's help that I wanted to direct my own work and he helped me do that. Now it wasn't just a project collaboration but turned into a career collaboration. That's a key, meeting directors who are out to help you but who also know you're trying to help them by being flexible as needed. There is also something to be said for an adaptation or rewrite versus you coming up with an original script. On *Assassins*, it was an entity that Dick had, and he was looking for a writer to do what he wanted. With *Conspiracy*, it was my original

I'd say adaptation is more from the head while original is more from the heart.

script, which I brought to him, so even though it wasn't a contract or verbal agreement, we seemed to have an understanding that Dick was not going to completely change my story. And, to his credit, he kept to that understanding.

What were the main differences between collaborating with Donner and Eastwood?

A large difference is the circumstances. Writing for Eastwood was in between directing films, which wasn't the case with Dick. I did *Blood Work* around directing *Payback* and wrote most of *Mystic River* around *The Order*. Because of this, Clint and I didn't have a lot of face-to-face time. We talked about *Blood Work* and what I thought it should be, and then later in the meeting he put in his thoughts. Clint's got a strong point of view, but he doesn't let you in on what it is right away on purpose. He doesn't want you to just agree with him or kill something great in your head that you might not express to him because it's different than what he might have had in mind. After I finally directed, it was freeing to just write the script and say good luck to the director and hope it turns out okay for them. It wasn't as personal.

Has it been easier working with Eastwood the second time around?

I had a better idea of him, and he was more comfortable with me. He just sent me the book, met with me for an hour, and basically told me to write the best version I could. I was at liberty to do what I wanted, and then he would say lose this scene or heighten this, but it was much more loose this time. I scouted with him in Boston for the film, and one of his drivers said to me, "You wrote *Blood Work*, right? I can tell Clint likes you 'cause you wouldn't be hired again if he didn't. He must think you know how to do your job." That was the 18th Eastwood movie that driver had worked on, so it was one

of the best compliments I had gotten in some time.

There was a chancy scene you wrote in A Knight's Tale where in the middle of a medieval jousting event the crowd starts singing Queen's "We Will Rock You." What made you try such a bold anachronism?

I really only think of it as partly an anachronism. I love period movies. They always read like a fairy tale because they're looked at in this weird veneer of history. Period pieces are never real because there are so many inaccuracies in the recording of history to begin with, so in some ways there are no anachronisms. I went about *A Knight's Tale* with the idea that the '70s are always the '70s whether 1970 or 1370. People in 1370 were very modern for that time; they didn't think they were stuffy, so the idea was to make the film feel modern. If you were in 1370, you would be thinking you were trendy, not outdated. Jousting was a big sport back then; they had major tours and probably everyone had their favorite knight like a favorite athlete today. With "We Will Rock You," the idea was, if you saw 1,500 horses coming at each other with lances, people wouldn't politely applaud. They'd go crazy and cheer like any other sporting event. So it's about the spirit of the anachronism. If it matches

up with the spirit of the time period, then it fits, even if doesn't chronologically.

Was the approach any different with your scriptwriting when you were directing your own story for the first time as with Payback?

Once the script was written, I never looked at it again until the morning we shot the scenes. I was eager to collaborate with anybody and everybody once we did. If actors, who have more time to sit down and observe, felt there was something cool, I was mostly game to do it. When I originally wrote scripts, I always had an idea that I wouldn't let anyone change a word if I ever got to direct. What I found when I got on set was that it was much easier for me to be fast and loose with scripts because I realized it was about the spirit of the script, not keeping to the script itself, that would make for the best possible result. It was usually obvious to me what suggestions were in keeping with the spirit and which were just silly.

More than half of the past seven projects you've worked on have come from novels. How does adapting compare with coming up with original scripts?

It depends on the book. First anyone who claims authorship when they do an adaptation is very brash. There's a lot of creative work to do, but in general what you do in an adaptation is bring someone else's story to the screen. In a way it's like being a director for someone who doesn't adapt his or her own stuff. What's difficult is visualizing character's thoughts in a novel because scripts are about action, not about showing a long scene of a character in deep thought. I've been fortunate that most of the books I've done I've loved. I'd say adaptation is more from the head while original is more from the heart. Of course, sometimes you don't have an original idea to do, and it's nice to do a book as a break. **WB**