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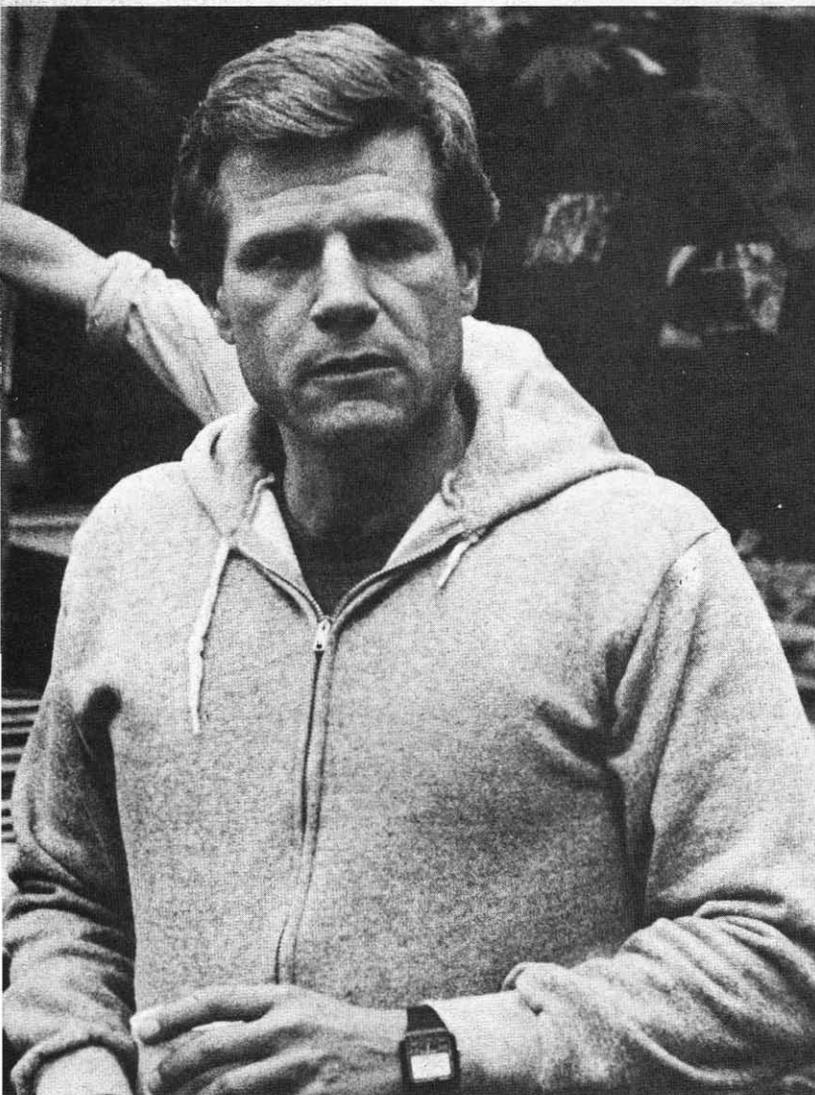
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Tom Holland on

FRIGHT NIGHT

The Screenwriter of *Psycho 2*
Prepares For His Directorial Debut

By Abbie Bernstein



Let's say you're a 17-year-old boy who loves horror movies. (For many of our readers, that probably isn't much of a stretch.) Your idea of a near-perfect evening is trying to get past first base with your girl friend as the two of you watch some outrageous schlock opus on your local TV station's "Fright Night" presentation. Your family and friends all know about your passions, so when you start insisting that your charming and devilishly handsome new next-door-neighbor is really a murderous vampire, everybody assumes the ol' cathode ray tube has begun to fry your brains. Everybody, that is, except your neighbor, who knows you're absolutely right and doesn't appreciate your interest in him one bit. You know that he knows that you know, so you desperately turn for help to "Fright Night" host Peter Vincent, a has-been ham actor who's played a lot of Van Helsing types in his day. Unfortunately, Mr. Vincent doesn't believe in vampires and, worse, has nerves of warm cream cheese. Meanwhile, your nocturnal neighbor is determined to shut you up before you can cause him any more trouble.

So goes the premise of *Fright Night*, a new feature film currently in production under the auspices of Columbia Pictures. *Fright Night* has the distinction of being the first major-studio theatrical release to treat vampires in a manner that is contemporary (unlike Universal's remake of *Dracula*), yet non-satirical (in contrast to *Love at First Bite*) in its depiction of traditional, shape-shifting, cross-fearing, fanged undead (as opposed to the jaded non-beasts of *The Hunger*).

Back in Fango #30, Tom Holland—screenwriter of *Psycho 2*, *The Beast Within* and *Class of 1984*—said of his craft, "... unless you have a director who knows what you're talking about, you're dead." Since Holland is both writer and director of *Fright Night*, it may be safe to assume that, this time, the writer and the director each know exactly what the other is trying to say.

When I first spoke with Holland, it was at Laird Studios, where most of the film's interiors were to be shot. With the start of principal photography a few weeks away, *Fright Night*'s second-story production offices were humming with activity. Across the hall, darkly bearded director of photography Jan Kiesser conferred with production designer John DeCuir, Jr. on the design of a set planned to accommodate a major effects sequence (the senior DeCuir was designer for *Ghostbusters*, and serves as a production consultant on *Fright Night*). Hanging out in Holland's reception area is amiable young actor William ("Call me Bill") Ragsdale, who will play Charley Brewster, the high school kid who knows too much. Pam Madeiros, assistant to Holland, is attempting to find the young star immediate and affordable housing.

After making his way into the behind-the-camera end of the movie business with scripts for *Beast Within* and *Psycho 2*, former actor Tom Holland gets his chance to direct on *Fright Night*.



Vampire Chris Sarandon turns on the undead charisma in a night club.

PHOTOS: © 1985 COLUMBIA PICTURES

Holland passes through with *Fright Night* casting director Jackie Burch. All the *Fright Night* roles have been cast, with the exception of Jerry Dandrige, Charley's vampire neighbor. With the start date looming before them, they are understandably preoccupied with their search. (One week later, they sign Chris Sarandon, Best Supporting Oscar nominee for *Dog Day Afternoon* and most recently seen opposite Goldie Hawn in *Protocol*, to everyone's joy and relief.)

In regard to this casting problem, Holland remarks that many actors "are afraid of playing vampires—they think either the movie won't work and they'll get laughed at, or the movie does work and they get typed forever and become Christopher Lee."

Why does Holland like vampires? "I don't know—why do you like them?" Pressed, he elaborates: "I guess all of us would like to be like that—sleep all day, play all night, live forever, be incredibly attractive to women. They're a terrific archetype. I'm in love with them more than I'm scared of them. I love Jerry."

Holland is in his late 30s, with a deep voice, craggy good looks and dark hair that's beginning to go silver. Interviewing him can be a little tricky, not because he's evasive—indeed, he couldn't be more candid—but because he

keeps soliciting his interviewer's opinion. For instance, he wants to know if I think *Fright Night* has "crossover" potential—that is, will it appeal to a broader audience than hardcore horror fans? I tell him I think it's all a question of how the film is made. This launches us into a discussion of the various approaches to horrific themes—everything from critical writeoffs like *Friday the 13th* (what Holland calls "the fuck-and-die movie") to pillars of Hollywood respectability like *The Exorcist* with its truckload of Oscar nominations, including one for Best Picture.

"Well, I don't think we're going to get an Academy Award nomination for Best Picture," Holland says, "but if this is perceived as a good time, 'an E-ride at Disneyland' as [Columbia executive] John Byers would say, then I think we have a chance at having it taken seriously. If it's perceived as exploitation, no, but *Fright Night's* not an exploitation film to me. I really love this genre. It infuriates me when people look down on it."

Holland's initial interest in writing came early. "I used to sit down and try to write Westerns. I was eight or nine, real young. But my parents are not terribly literary people—they were not very encouraging."

Consequently, Holland put down his pencil and paper and took up acting instead. "I

think I got into acting partially because it was a way to get girls. It's not the most solid of motivations, I guess, but it was heartfelt."

By the time he finished high school, Holland had found other ways to meet girls, but stuck with acting because "I made a living at it. I think I might have gotten completely discouraged if I hadn't done as well as I did as immediately as I did. I went to college for a year, came out to Los Angeles during the summer with a girl who'd been a child actress. She had an agent, the agent took me on and sent me around to two or three places, and the next thing I knew I was under contract at Warner Bros. When that happens to you, it carries you along with it."

It carried Holland through a lot of film and television work during the '60s and early '70s, in movies like Jacques Demy's *The Model Shop* and soap operas like *Love of Life*. He took time out to graduate from U.C.L.A. and get a law degree that he never used, continuing to act as he found the scope of his ambitions changing. "I loved production. I loved being on a set. You know the old line, 'The first minute on the set's the most exciting minute in the world, the second minute on the set is the most boring?' I never felt that way. I always loved it. What happened was, as an actor, I was saying in my head as the director was



blocking out scenes, 'No, that's not right, it should be blocked *this* way.' That happened very early on, but it took me a long time to recognize that all my instincts were to direct and not to act. When I was acting, I got more and more frustrated because I really wanted to direct; it became more and more obvious that I wanted control. Not only was I thinking about what I was going to be doing as an actor, I was thinking about what the other actors should be doing, where the camera should be, what lenses should be on the camera, how it should cut together. I always had the ability to see things in shots and cuts—I could picture the sequences in my head."

He began aiming for a directorial career via the route of screenwriting. "I started back in '72 or '73. The hot thing around town then was original screenplays. Guys like John Milius wrote *Judge Roy Bean*, these scripts were going for \$250,000 and then on the next script, these guys were getting the chance to direct. I was naive enough to think that I'd sit

down and write one script, sell it for a quarter of a million and direct the next one."

That wasn't quite how it worked out. "Screenwriting was the hardest thing I'd ever done. I became obsessed with learning the craft of it, it became a challenge in and of itself. It became so difficult, a mountain that I wanted to climb so badly, that I stopped worrying about directing and I wound up learning how to write. In other words, I think I became a serious writer after the fact. I started out wanting to direct, but when I found out how hard writing was—and that I couldn't do it—I took it *real* seriously."

In Holland's view, he finally hit his stride as a screenwriter with his fifth effort, an as-yet-unproduced *film noir* script entitled *Border Crossing*, which was admired enough to start getting him paying writing assignments.

The first film Holland wrote for hire to see the light of a projector was an independently-made monster movie, *The Beast Within*, a tale of a hapless teenager afflicted with a curse that

caused him to transform into a bloodthirsty swamp beast. *Beast* was notable mainly for Tom Burman's special effects; Holland saves us the trouble of being tactful about the film as a whole. "It's trash," he smiles, without a trace of defensiveness. "Things like *The Beast Within* were the kind of entry-level jobs I got as a screenwriter. I was thrown out of dailies, excluded from the set, excluded from location and gotten rid of as soon as possible. I got thrown out of dailies because I told the producer that they were in trouble. You could see it in dailies, but he didn't believe me. I finally got invited to a screening of the completed film after umpteen cuts. I saw it, got up and walked out past the producer without saying a word, I walked past the director without saying a word and I haven't seen or talked to either one of them to this day."

His next writer-for-hire credit, *The Class of 1984*, was a happier experience. Directed by Mark (Firestarter) Lester, *Class* followed an urban high-school teacher (played by Perry King) through a baptism of fire and blood with the sadistic students under his charge as he goes from innocence ("c'mon, the kids can't be that bad") to gory vengeance after the young punks rape his pregnant wife and cause the nervous breakdown and death of one of his colleagues (Roddy McDowall, who had a wonderful scene in which his character conducts class at gunpoint, threatening to shoot pupils who give the wrong answers). The hero vented his wrath by doing things like cutting off one of his tormentor's arms with a tabletop buzzsaw. Holland thinks this "was going over the top. Mark Lester is terrific, I really like him. Except I think he didn't need the buzzsaw, but he didn't trust the story enough. I could never answer the question of how to justify vigilante violence, I don't think I was ever comfortable with it. The script had visual setpieces, but it never had a really coherent storyline that dealt with the vigilante theme. The theme got submerged and became exploitation. And that was my fault, because I could never deal with it."

But we needn't fear that Holland, left to his own directorial devices, plans to shy away from violence in *Fright Night*—the script calls for throat-rippings, blood-splatterings, numerous unpleasant transformations, a tribute to *Evil Dead*'s infamous pencil scene and, of course, lots of staking and biting. For Holland, the use of screen violence is dictated by context: "I love violence. But there's violence that is not reality for me, which is what I think I do, and what I consider a lot of horror movies do, as opposed to reality—psychological violence like *Looking for Mr. Goodbar*, which can be really horrifying and disturbing. When you're dealing with that, then I think restraint is called for. But this kind of stuff, horror movie violence, is meant as a good time, I think." He grins. "I think."

Holland's next job after *Class* was the screenplay for *Psycho 2*, a film in which violence plus clever plot twists gave its audiences a good time that translated into box office success. Being one of the creative forces behind a financially successful movie helps propel a lot of people toward their career



Horror Host Peter Vincent (Roddy McDowell) pulls the old Peter Cushing routine on a teenage vampire who (opposite page) goes on to show his scars proudly.

goals. Holland did one more for-hire project, *Cloak and Dagger* (which reteamed him with *Psycho II* director Richard Franklin), sold an original screenplay, *Scream for Help* (a thriller filmed by director Michael Winner, as yet unreleased) and finally "knew that my position in the community was strong enough that if I could come up with a commercial concept and execute it well, I could direct. I knew by then I'd gained sufficient credibility. So I had to design a script that X number of studios would want—which was the original dream 10 years ago." Thus was *Fright Night* born.

Holland took his new work to producer Herb Jaffe, who agreed both that the script was extremely commercial and that Holland was ready to direct. Robert Lawrence, who is Columbia's senior vice-president in charge of worldwide production, and John Byers, Columbia's vice president of creative affairs (who is probably the only Hollywood executive ever to screen *Basket Case* for his entire office staff), shepherded the project through the studio in late August. It got a green light, started filming Dec. 3 and is expected to open in theatres nationwide this August.

"Columbia, the studio itself, has been terrific in terms of production. They've given me wonderful people." What does he want and expect from his cast and crew? "I'm more comfortable with people who like me and whom I like, God knows. You get a sense of that pretty quickly. And I like people who can bring something to it, who can give me more than I need, so I don't have to work quite as hard. I've gotten creative contributions from any number of people, who have taken my original shot designs and made them much better. I'm thankful for all of that input. They've figured out ways to do things that I would never have come up with."

As an example, he cites a sequence in which vampiric Jerry Dandrige spies through the windows of his own house on Charley and Peter, who are inside seeking their adversary. "Those windows had to be designed in such a way that you see the heroes from outside at various points as they traverse through the house." As Holland continues, he uses the scale model of the house sitting on his desk as a visual aide, also referring to an enormous notebook filled with his shot lists.

"We're going to have stairs inside the house. We start the camera in front of the house and watch them go up the stairs from outside, drift around to the side of the house, pick them up through another window farther up the stairs, then get a diagonal crane up the house through the second floor, looking

through another window as they come up to the landing. When you're doing that with three different floors, it gets very, very complicated. The sets had to be designed to make that work."

Holland also waxes enthusiastic for the scene in which "Charley comes into his bedroom and the phone rings. He picks it up and his back is to the window. He listens, and the vampire says, 'Hello. Are you there, Charley?' Charley doesn't say anything, figuring if he keeps his mouth shut, Dandrige won't know for sure. And Dandrige says, 'I know you're there, Charley. I can see you.' Then Charley turns around and looks out the window, and there across the yard standing in the window of the Dandrige house is Jerry. Now the usual way to do that shot is you'd do

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Charley (William Ragsdale) and his horror-show accomplice (McDowell) get set to go to work on Charley's vampire neighbor.

a subjective shot and you'd zoom in on Jerry standing in the window." Holland makes a whooshing "zoom" noise, accompanied by a vampiric snarl. "Well, I wanted to do a shot where from Charley's subjective point of view in his terror, it feels to him as though Jerry's entire house is moving closer to him, swooping towards him. In other words, as though Jerry wasn't 30 feet away in his house, but three feet away in his house and was gonna lean right out the window and [Holland mimes a gesture of fatal brutality] do that to Charley. Five million times I've seen the camera moving; let's see the house move. There's a weirdness to it. There are two ways to accomplish what I'm talking about. One is to build the Dandridge house on rollers, and literally move the entire side of the Dandridge house across the soundstage over to Charley's window." Unfortunately, that would be extremely cumbersome and expensive. The alternative? "We're doing blue-screen, we're shooting a plate of the Dandridge house and moving that. You'll see that image move toward you, which will seem like the house is moving." The shot will be accompanied by shooting Charley's window looking out on a blue-screen, lit by fluorescent lights. A separate shot will be made of Dandridge looking out his window. The room shot of the Dandridge house will then be matted in to the shot of the stationary window in Charley's house.

"Jan Kiesser and John DeCuir are going to

make it work for me without moving the whole wall of the house," says Holland, giving credit where it's due. "There are a number of shots like that in this, that I designed without figuring how they'd be made to work. The people around me have been able to come up with ways to make them work; I'm eternally grateful, and they're thrilled with me for giving them the challenge."

Cinematographer Kiesser corroborates this: "The opticals and special effects are challenges—I've never flown bats before. Mostly we're combining different stuff that's been done before in new ways. *Fright Night* is more high style than the average film in this genre. The script is attractive and so is the visual concept. It's wonderful to have something with this kind of visual concept."

"One of the joys of doing a horror movie is that you can be visually stylized," Holland affirms. The style of *Fright Night*, he says, was not imposed on the finished script, but was rather an integral consideration from the story's inception. "I don't think you can write a story unless you're visualizing it as you go along, can you? You see something in your head, you hear people talk in your head, you see people coming out of light, you see the darkness. I see all of that when I write. One of the reasons I think that I've done as well as I have as a writer is that I do visual setpieces, where the story moves forward with minimal amounts of dialogue."

He does think it's possible to get carried away with the visual aspects of filmmaking: "If the shots become such show-off shots that they pull you out of the story, then it's to the detriment of the film, and I'll cut 'em out." He believes the "show-off" shots usually occur "when filmmakers are ashamed of the genre, when they're embarrassed by the genre. That's when form overwhelms content. In the script, there should be no scene that doesn't move the story forward. In the movie, there ideally should be no shot that doesn't move the story forward. If you're so in love with a shot that doesn't do anything to move your story forward, then something's wrong. And if you do too many of them, you're really in trouble. Story always takes precedence."

Right now, pre-production takes precedence—I have to clear out so that Holland can meet with his cinematographer and production designer. As I leave, Kiesser is holding up the scale model of Jerry's house, turning it so that Holland and Co. can enjoy a vampire's-eye view of the interior as they visualize the tiny, terrified people within.

In parting, Holland tells me I'm welcome on the set whenever I'd like to come. Events to subsequently unfold would surpass my wildest dreams of journalistic access—seven-hour makeup sessions, live wolves, blood splattering an entire mob of extras... but these are stories for another day (and another issue of *Fango*).

Fright Night will have its share of nasty doings.