

DAWN OF THE DEAD AN EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

Movie fans will probably recognize actor Mike Christopher for his leading zombie role in George Romero's classic film Dawn of the Dead (1978). In the following candid interview, Mike talks about his experience working on what is now considered one of the most iconic films in horror history:

When Dawn of the Dead began filming, Mike Christopher was performing in a band called "Fluid," playing gigs in the area where the film was being shot: "Fluid was a theatrical, orchestral, space-rock band. We had a stage set with geodesic crystals covering the keyboards. We beamed onto the stage in a Plexiglas tube. We were portraying bald aliens from inner space, mere projections into this dimension. [When] George Romero saw our band picture, he selected Paul Musser - our sax player - and myself for lead zombie roles. Paul was the plaid shirt zombie killed at the airport, and [he is also] the bald head on some of the Dawn of the Dead promotional material."

Mike's character, the "Hare Krishna" zombie, managed to distinguish itself in the audience's imagination, and has become forever immortalized as a Cult Classics zombie action figure. At the time, however, Mike recalls that not everyone was fond of the now legendary zombie: "[It's] a funny story. The production team actually got a letter from the International Society for Krishna Consciousness

protesting my portrayal of a devotee as a zombie! When I asked George about the idea [of using] a Krishna, he said he wanted to have a distinctive looking zombie for that role.”

In a past interview with Avantguarda Web, Mike explained that Romero gave the actors direction only when needed because – in his words: “If he showed people how to drag their foot or tilt their head, everyone would drag their foot and tilt their head the same way...” Since Romero encouraged his actors to bring their own interpretations to the zombie characters, I wondered how and to what extent this contributed to the movie’s overall success. Mike replied: “I’m sure that [this] decision contributed to a more individual look for many of the zombie characters. Remember, there was not much recent zombie action to refer to back then, except for Night of the Living Dead. These days, there are zombie schools and tons of movies to watch while [you] prepare your zombie stagger. In my case, I decided to imagine I was going to vomit, and just plod ahead taking the slow, unrelenting approach. [In my scene... I found Fran (played by Gaylen Ross)... all alone and defenseless.] Without a gun, there was not much Fran could do but to continue to retreat until she was eventually overtaken. During a cast commentary on the four-disk DVD set, Galen made fun of how slow I was moving. When I first heard [that], I admit I was a bit miffed. However, in retrospect, I realize [that] she [was pointing] out an unintended consequence of my movements. If you

only have one scene in a film, you might as well stretch it out!”

In 2008, the UK indie horror flick “Colin” played homage to Mike’s character. In the film, the leading character Colin is inflicted with a zombie bite, and the movie follows Colin’s journey as he wanders through the zombie apocalypse, appearing lost and confused, trying to “make sense of what is happening to him.” Mike was pleased to hear that Marc Price, the writer and director of Colin, was influenced by Mike’s portrayal of the Hare Krishna Zombie: “The movie Colin is a film which I highly recommend. It was incredible to hear from Marc via social media a few years back about how the Hare Krishna Zombie character made such an impression on him... ”

Regarding the popularity of the Hare Krishna Zombie, Mike shared the following: “Some people laughed when they saw my character... and some were terrified... It is hard to watch Dawn of the Dead and not remember the Hare Krishna dude. Even [when I am] in character at the conventions, grandparents willingly present their grandchildren for me to hold while [they take] a picture for the family album. Stranger than that, the kids are usually fascinated. I did manage to terrorize one adult at a convention a few years back. I noticed this gal’s nervous mannerisms and went shambling towards her at low speed banging my tambourine. I had her screaming and running down the aisles of the convention hall. I figured she got her money’s worth

since that was the last I saw of her. People were doubled over laughing at her genuine dismay. Everyone except for Galen, that is . . . She looked at me and said "What's wrong with her?" I guess Galen didn't think I was scary. "

Monroeville Mall, the spot where survivors (attempted) to seek safety during the zombie apocalypse, has become an infamous location among horror film fans. Mike remembered shooting at the mall: "I was there for only two of the all-nighters at the Monroeville Mall and I'm tellin' ya, they were surreal. The first night, I arrived [at about 9pm] just as the mall was closing. It was strange seeing hundreds of people gradually turning into zombies. We were staged in a large room that was filled with chairs and a few tables... [We'd be] sitting around drinking coffee until a Production Assistant would run in and say: "I need you, you, you, you, you, you and you . . . follow me." At that point we would jump up and rush into the mall, where someone would move us into place... Following a brief instruction, we stood there until we heard "Action," [and] then we began to shamle about trying to perfect our own signature style of zombie movements until we heard "Cut." We did this several times. Then, [we] were sent back to the room until we were called on again."

"The second night was more personal for me since that is when we shot the scene with Flyboy running through the crowd of zombies past me, near the entrance to the hideout. I also got to shamle up the stairwell that night. The location for the hideout was

actually not part of the Monroeville Mall and neither was the skylight on the roof. The hideout [was] on a vacant floor in George's office building on Fort Pitt Blvd in beautiful, downtown Pittsburgh. The skylight was part of the roof of [his] office building. The skylight on the mall roof was a prop."

Most movies have behind the scenes moments that we never hear about. I asked Mike what his BTS moment was: "On my first night at the mall, I showed up with a pair of old, leather 'hippie' sandals which I planned to wear as part of my costume. The glasses were my daily wear pair. I was told by wardrobe that the decision had been made for me to appear barefoot. No problem, I thought. By the time we got to my scene, production was running behind schedule, so we didn't get to rehearse. So here I am, crashing through [a] pile of boxes while Fran lights the flare. She starts waving it in my face, literally IN MY FACE. I had to put my hands up to protect my eyes from the hot sulfur sparks while trying to look like I was just reaching for the damned thing. Next thing I know, the glowing sparks are landing on the floor and I am stepping on them in my bare feet. I actually had to act dead - like I felt no pain."

Over thirty years since production, Mike along with various other cast and crew members are frequently asked to be guests at horror film conventions and Comic Cons. Compared to other zombie films out there, Dawn of the Dead has earned an extremely loyal fan base: "Prior to George Romero, zombies were portrayed as being under the spell of a witch

doctor who turned humans into mindless slaves. [Zombies were] generally [portrayed as] a localized phenomenon and they weren't 'free roaming.' Dawn of the Dead was the [first] film that actually portrayed zombies as part of a global, possibly species-ending event. The film introduced the idea that civilized society may soon become an obsolete concept."

Mike added: "What was Romero thinking when he was inspired to make Dawn of the Dead? ...Most people are unable to relate to these types of hard facts, let alone attempt to integrate them into their personal framework of daily reality. How can someone ignore the growing number of deadly serious problems which have no discernible solution? I believe that Dawn of the Dead has become the most believable vehicle to bridge the gap between fictional and impending disaster."

Regarding the films enduring popularity and recognition, Mike shared the following: "How can a movie like Dawn of the Dead be so enormously popular and classified as entertainment? My best guess is that somewhere in our genetic makeup, we are now realizing that the brief stability [of 1950's style USA] is drawing to a close. If I am correct, George then becomes our mentor [because he] took the initiative to sound the warning [bell]..."

Dawn of the Dead was a groundbreaking film, and continues to be recognized and awarded for its contributions and accomplishments. But no one at

the time, including Mike Christopher, imagined that the film would become the massive cult hit that it is today: "As far as I know, none of us had any idea it would become so popular. How could anyone imagine [that] those three Romero movies would spawn an entire genre of filmmaking and FX artistry? David Emge (who played Stephen in the film) said once that he overheard people talking about Dawn of the Dead on the subway after it [had] premiered in New York. [That's when he realized] that it was something more than just another indie horror movie."

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