

# midnight movie madness

BY JOSEPH PATTON

In 1968, George Romero made a low-budget, explicit shocker called *Night of the Living Dead*. The dead, revived by an intense dose of radiation, roam the countryside, automatons with one motive: attack and devour the living. Even the "dead" must eat to stay "alive." *Living Dead* opened in drive-ins, where most films wind up, but it was soon revived at the Elgin Theatre in New York, where it played to young, enthusiastic viewers Fridays and Saturdays at midnight. Audiences went repeatedly to scream with delight as cannibalistic cadavers munched on bones and gorged on intestines and livers.

*Night of the Living Dead* pioneered the phenomenon of "midnights" — special midnight showings of films too excessive, too outrageous, too "weird" to be shown at any other time. Ben Barenholtz, who owned the Elgin when *Living Dead* was unleashed, has compared midnights to pajama parties where all the rules are broken. They're not just movies, but events, and thrill-seeking spectators frequently dress in costume, talk back to the screen, roar, boo, cheer, clap, whistle and shout. At midnights, restraint is out of place. Every midnight is Halloween.

Films that attract late-night clubs are as close to comic strips as live action can be, with something crazed and irreverent about them. Take *Martin*, for instance. When Romero's shy, spooky debunking of the Dracula legend surfaced at midnights in 1978, it was obvious that he had scored again. Martin is a shy, attractive 17-year-old who looks like the boy next door, but he has a freakish fixation: bloodsucking. Martin's ancestors emigrated to Pittsburgh from Transylvania, but since he is fang-

less, Martin uses a hypodermic to knock out his victims and hacks at their wrists with a razor blade to drink their spurting blood. Viewers leave *Martin* unsure whether he is a victim of the vampire inheritance running in the family, or a psychotic delinquent with a horrible habit.

Not much later Romero's *Dawn of the Dead* was sneaked at midnights, played briefly in regular runs, and then settled in for long runs exclusively at midnight. *Dawn* is a sicker, slicker *Living Dead*. Three men and a woman seek shelter from swarms of marauding cadavers inside a shopping mall. "Instinct brings them back here," one of the survivors says. "This place was a very important part of their lives!" All of Romero's films are awash with gore, but *Dawn* proves, once and for all, nothing succeeds like excess. A ghoul stumbles into the path of a whirring helicopter blade, and the top of its head is sliced off. A corpse bites a chunk from a victim's neck, and blood gushes like water from a fire hydrant. Spectators are open-mouthed in horror when the carnage begins; gradually, their screams dissolve into raucous laughter; eventually they break into wild applause, cheering on the last of the survivors as they escape scores of stalking goons in the best cliff-hanger tradition of vintage Saturday matinee serials. For Romero's fans, though, too much is not enough: *Day of the Dead* is in the works, completing the Zombie trilogy.

John Waters uses Romero's favorite device—shock—with gleeful abandon in *Pink Flamingos*. When it came out in 1972, *Flamingos* provoked howls of

disgust, acquired a rowdy cult following, and made its leading actor, Divine — a 300-pound female impersonator billed as "the greatest grossout of all time" — the first superstar of the midnight circuit. Divine lives in a burnt-out trailer with her son, a longhaired punk with a chicken fetish, and her mother, who has a thing for eggs. They enter a contest sponsored by the *National Enquirer* to find "the filthiest people alive." Tacky, sleazy, berserk, *Flamingos* is rated X, but viewers who expect hard-core sex are disappointed; all they get to witness is incest, fellatio, castration and exhibitionism. "To me, bad taste is what entertainment is all about," Waters writes in *Shock Value*. "If someone vomits watching one of my films, it's like getting a standing ovation." *Flamingos'* climactic scene — Divine scoops up a fresh pile of French poodle excrement and eats it, lickety-split — is one of the most talked-about in the history of midnights. The strong of stomach are outraged and amused at the same time, while the squeamish look in vain on the back of the seat in front of them for an emergency bag.

David Lynch's *Eraserhead* rivals and, quite possibly, surpasses *Pink Flamingos* in sheer grossness. It combines elements of science-fiction and fantasy, but it's impossible to categorize, let alone explain. *Eraserhead* concerns Henry, a simpleton with a bouffant hairdo that resembles a fright wig; Mary X, his moronic wife, and their offspring, a cross between a human and a dinosaur. Baby's crying sends Mary home to Mother. Henry feeds Baby a worm, and Baby grows... and Grows... and GROWS!! Poor, startled Henry retreats into a sordid dream world, torn between the Beautiful Girl Across the Hall, a hooker who pouts prettily, and the Lady in the Radiator, who sings sweetly while worms fall around her and squish underfoot. In

the end Henry loses his head, and it is turned into an eraser. *Eraserhead* fans, who roar with satisfaction during its grosser scenes, believe that a truer picture of the mind of middle-class America would be hard to find, except maybe at a K-Mart checkout lane. Lynch, of course, went on to fame directing *Elephant Man*.

Jim Sharman's *Rocky Horror Picture Show* — an outrageous melange of cliches from monster epics, Marvel comics, beach-blanket frolics and Fifties and Sixties rock 'n' roll — is the quintessential fluke. It bombed in 1975, but not long after that it resurfaced at midnights and mushroomed into a national phenomenon. Brad and Janet, two clean-cut kids, get mixed up in the weird antics at a castle where Frank N Furter, a transvestite scientist from outer space, is conducting maniacal experiments, creating drag revues and a blond stud he plans to put to good use — his own.

Audiences turn *Rocky Horror* into a midnight masquerade, dressing as members of the mad doctor's kinky household: Riff Raff, the hunchback henchman; Magenta, his sister; the tap-dancing Little Nell; and Frank N Furter himself, in black corset and high heels. Audiences dance the Time Warp in the aisles, throw rice, spray water, flick cigarette lighters and sing along with the soundtrack: "Toucha, toucha, toucha, touch me/I wanna be dirty/Thrill me, fill me, fulfill me/Creature of the night." *Rocky Horror* is the most popular midnight so far, perhaps because it catches the confusion of two all-American kids agape at the sexual permissiveness of the Seventies.

*Shock Treatment*, a sequel from the makers of *Rocky Horror*, opened at the Waverly Theatre in New York last October, but it hasn't caught fire the way *Rocky Horror* did. Since they're aberrations, it's hard to predict what films will inspire midnight madness, but Frank Perry's *Mommie Dearest*, with Faye Dunaway in a monstrous caricature of Joan Crawford, has the stuff midnights are made of: outrageous humor, shocking behavior, topsy-turvy morality. Audiences have mimicked Crawford's abuse of her daughter, Christina, and her obsession with cleanliness, mock-strangling people sitting next to them with wire hangers and attacking gummy theatre floors with scrub brushes and Bon Ami.

Midnight movie fans often dream up their own bizarre scenarios. Here's mine: a solitary figure totters in high heels down Hollywood Blvd. Whatever it is, it looks like Joan Crawford in the last stages of leprosy, with the blank stare of the "living dead." Rolling her eyes, twisting her lips grotesquely, she cries "Chr — ist — in — aah!"

Outside the theatre, a poster reads: "The Maddest Mother of All Time Is Back — And This Time She's Really A Monster!! With apologies to George Romero, Wire Hanger Productions presents Divine in a film by John Waters, *Afternoon of the Living Dead* (NOT a Soap Opera). The Abuse Continues..."

Tickets, anyone?!

Joseph Patton lives in Charlottesville, Virginia; for the past three years or so he's managed a company that rents theaters in college towns to exhibit midnight movies. He knows whereof he speaks.

