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# SCI-FI ENTERTAINMENT



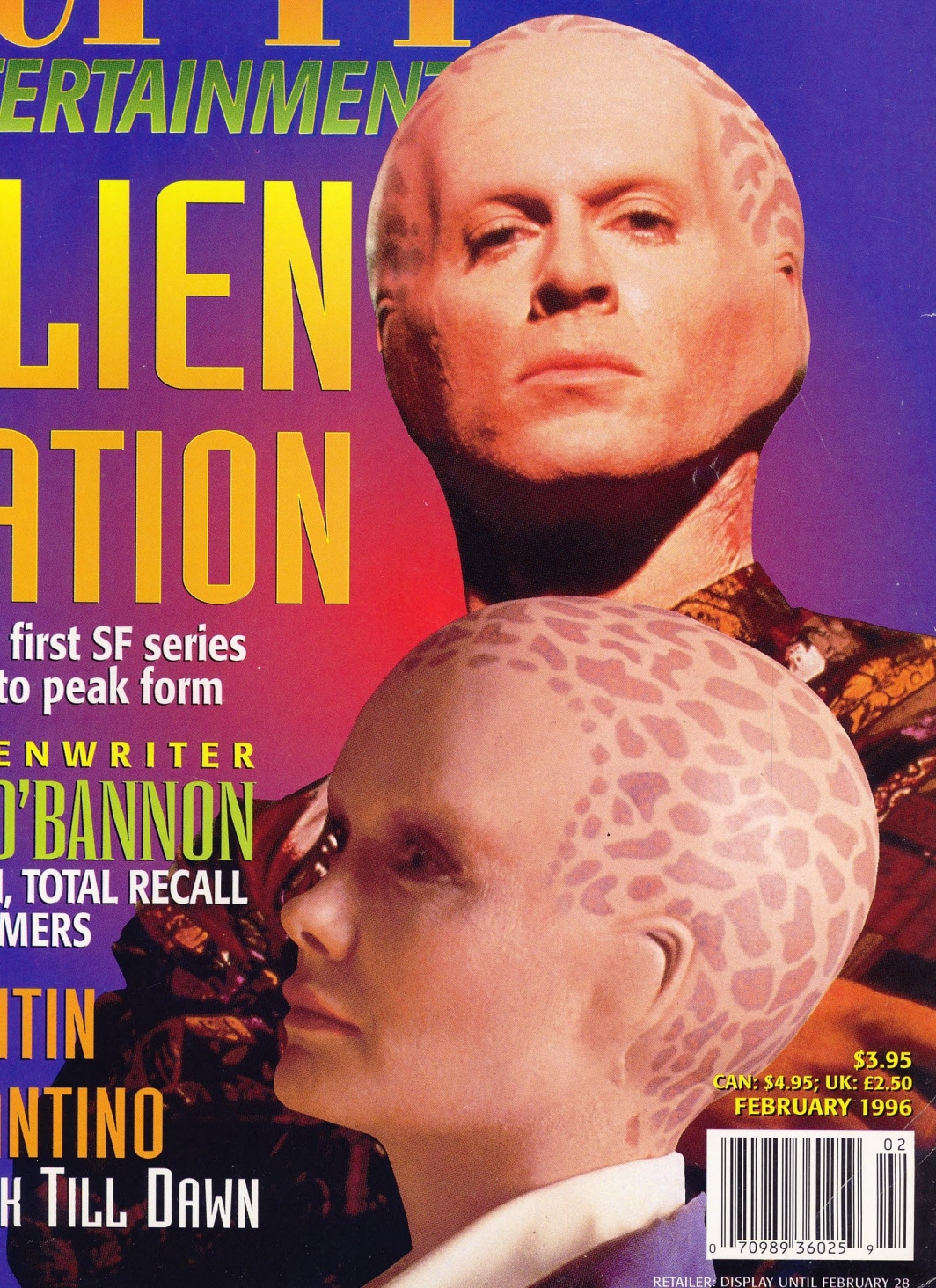
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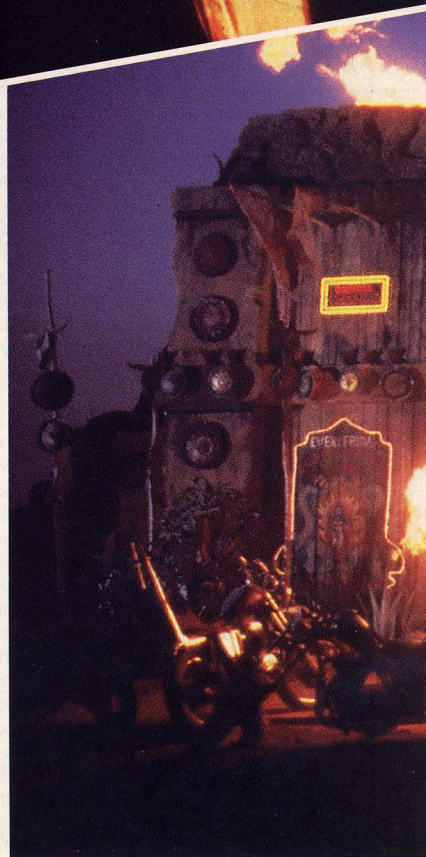
# Bordertown Terror

Desperado director Robert Rodriguez offers a different kind of vampire in *From Dusk Till Dawn*.

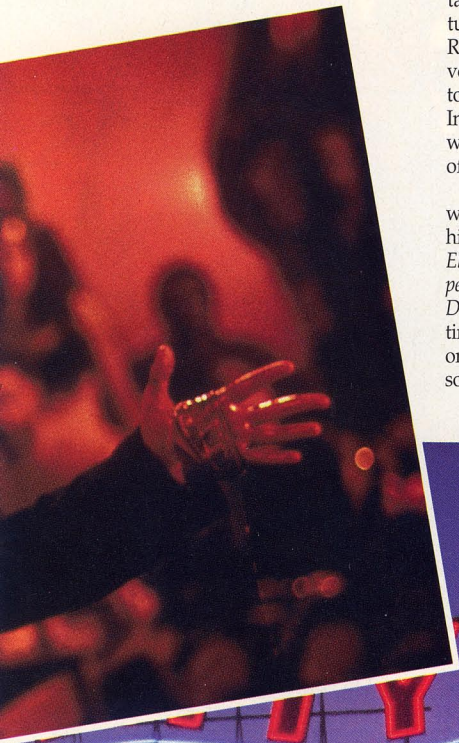
BY LISA MACCARILLO

**I**N COLLEGE, ROBERT RODRIGUEZ KNEW A FELLOW STUDENT who crossed into bordertown Mexico and disappeared forever: "He was in this town over spring break. When they finally found him, he'd been sacrificed by a cult in Matamoros. People are wary of bordertowns."

The territory just beyond U.S. borders forms the backdrop for Rodriguez's third foray into bordertown lore, this time with the bullet-riddled, vampire-infested tale of Richie and Seth Gecko (played by Quentin Tarantino and George Clooney), the bank robbing, trigger-happy anti-heroes of *From Dusk Till Dawn*. "Richard's just broken Seth out of a Texas prison, and because they're both cold-blooded killers, the entire state of Texas and the FBI want to lynch them. So, they're making a mad dash for the Mexican border," synopsisizes Tarantino, who also wrote the film's screenplay.





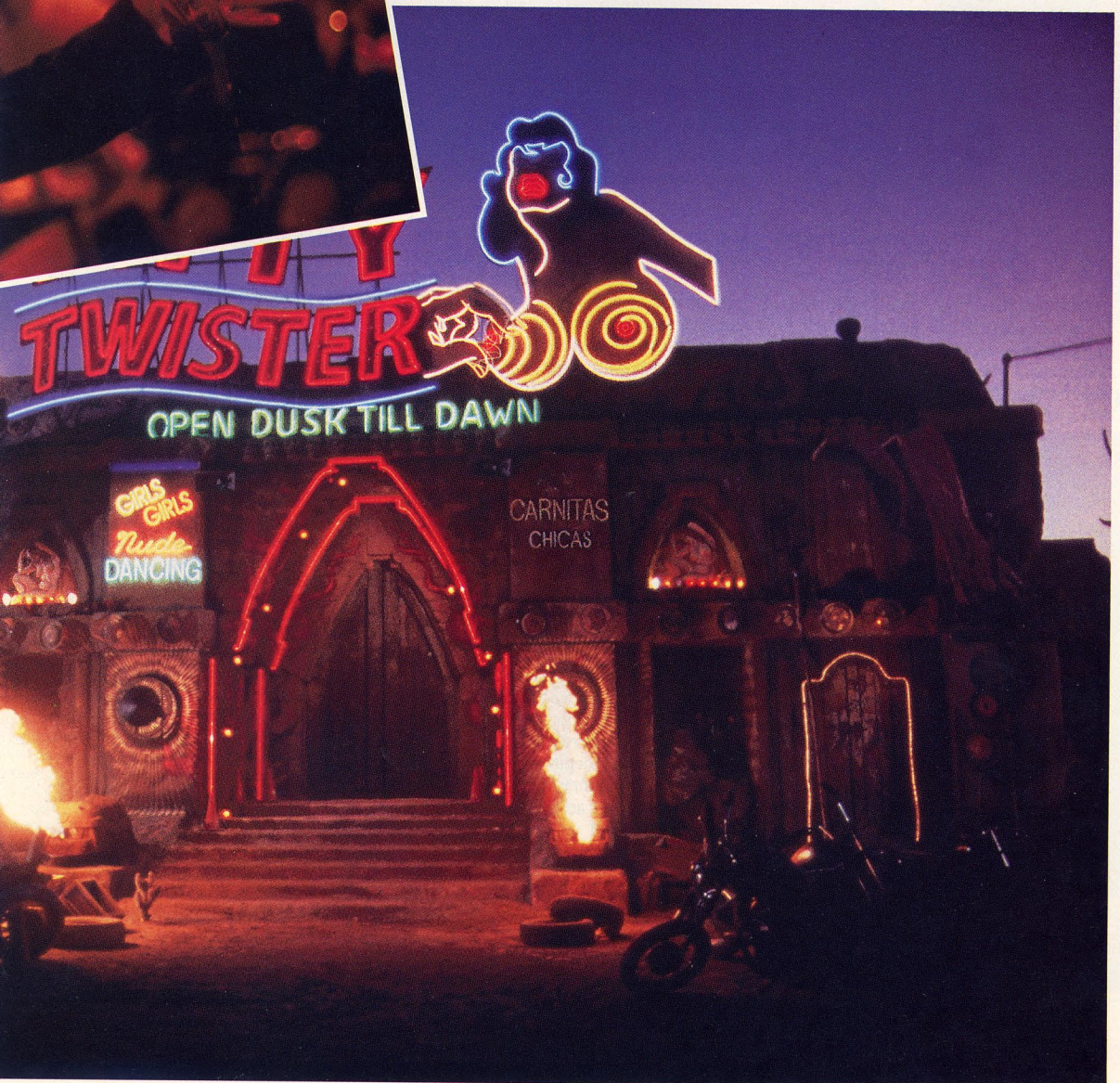


The Gecko brothers grease their path by taking a hostage. When "something unfortunate" happens to their victim while under Richie's care, they kidnap a preacher (Harvey Keitel) and his daughter (Juliette Lewis) to get across the border in their Winnebago. In Mexico, they take refuge in a seedy saloon which also happens to be the home of a pack of blood-thirsty vampires.

It's familiar territory for director Rodriguez, who explored bordertown violence in both his ultra low-budget (\$7,000) debut feature, *El Mariachi*, and its splashier follow-up, *Desperado*. Shot in L.A. for around \$17 million, *Dusk* evolved while Rodriguez and Tarantino were working on separate screenplays on Sony's Culver City lot. "We'd hang out sometimes while I was writing *Desperado* and

LEFT, Unaware that the supernatural is afoot, Richie Gecko (Quentin Tarantino) is about to make a very unwise move. BELOW, Outwardly an innocent haven for good times and lascivious conduct, this bordertown bistro is, in actuality, the nesting place of unspeakable evil.

he was writing *Pulp Fiction*, which was originally for TriStar," Rodriguez remembers. "We'd stay up late and talk because we were the only ones working on the lot at night. I was talking about my Mexico action movies and he said, 'I wrote a script for Mexico. It's a horror film.' I thought that was great. I'd always wanted to do a horror film set in







Mexico, but Quentin had already sold *From Dusk Till Dawn* for \$1,500; it was the first script he sold."

Years later, the script changed hands; when Tarantino was approached to direct, he immediately recalled his talks with Rodriguez. "It's about Mexican vampires, which is a completely different myth than the other vampire myth, so I wanted to do it rather than see somebody else do it," Rodriguez says. With his wife and co-producer Elizabeth Avellan pregnant with their first child, Rodriguez felt the timing was perfect to fit *Dusk* in before they became parents. "It was also the last Quentin script available until he writes something new. So, I figured I'd try it."

While both were in the middle of production on the anthology feature *Four Rooms*, Rodriguez and Tarantino "decided that if we could get this going, it would be a fun movie to shoot over the summer," says Rodriguez. "So, while I was mixing *Desperado* and *Four Rooms*, I was prepping *From Dusk Till Dawn*."

Rodriguez describes *Dusk* as being "like the monster in *The Thing*. It starts out being one thing and then re-forms into something else, with crazy people kidnapping and robbing in the first part, and moving over into complete fantasy/horror after they cross the border. When you're in another country and you don't know what the rules of that country are, or what kind of voodoo they have, you're the victim of another society. It's that kind of horror, which also gets mixed with humor, action, and drama."

After jumping the border, the Gecko brothers seek refuge in a seedy Mexican saloon. "I've seen real whorehouses and biker bars in

Mexican towns and they're usually pretty inviting, but spooky looking," Rodriguez says. "We took that to an extreme level and came up with something that, on the outside, looks like any Mexican strip bar, but if you look real close, you start to see that it's an old temple that's been covered over with pieces of wood and sleazy neon signs. It looks like you're going through the gates of hell. And then you get inside and it's a pit, just skulls and bones and signs of death, even in the architecture. It's as though you're inside a sacrificial temple with the walls barely concealed by bad posters and velvet paintings. It's kind of a fun, crazy place."

The bar's design reflects a personal hell not only for the outlaws, but also for their hostage, a "reformed" preacher played by Harvey Keitel. "When they enter this hell, they've all got to come to terms with each other and with their fates," Rodriguez explains. "Jake is a preacher who doesn't believe in God anymore, and Harvey was dream-casting in that role."

No stranger to independent filmmaking, Keitel numbers among his credits Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs* and Abel Ferrara's *Bad Lieutenant*, as well as numerous highly acclaimed films, including *Taxi Driver*, *Mean Streets*, and the recent *Clockers*. "Keitel is amazing. He gives the film so much weight just because he makes everything so believable," Rodriguez marvels. "He can take a shotgun and a baseball bat and turn them into a crucifix and make it look believable."

In the director's eyes, the entire cast helped elevate the project from the B-movie first envisioned into something unique: "It's fun seeing a movie that, in some ways, is sup-

posed to be an exploitation film, but with really big production values and really big stars. It's not a little scream-queen film anymore. It's something really bizarre that you'll probably never see again."

George Clooney, the Emmy-nominated star of television's *ER*, makes his big-screen debut as Seth. "George is really breaking out as an action god in this one," Rodriguez says. "He gets to do what you don't get to see him do on television. This is much edgier, darker stuff. He knew that this was his big chance and was very trusting of me as a director, but he also knew that I was really free in letting him invent what he wanted to do."

Despite the dark subject matter, Rodriguez, Clooney, and company maintained a light atmosphere on set. "We had a great time. George is actually a very funny, very comedic guy. He even had Harvey cracking up," Rodriguez recalls. "I like picking carefully who I work with—ultimately audiences have a better time if the filmmaker isn't worried about budgets and tripped-out stars, and is concentrating more on making a fun, creative movie. I think it becomes a good experience for everybody, not just the actors and crew, but the audience as well."

Tarantino, whom Rodriguez had also directed in *Desperado*, plays Seth's hot-headed younger brother Richie. "Unfortunately, his character is not in the movie as much as everybody else, so he wasn't around for all the monster stuff, but it was cool having him there, not just as an actor, but as the writer," Rodriguez says, pointing out that *Dusk* is his first project which he hasn't also written. "We had to be like Siamese twins. If I wrote the script, it would be easy for me to



LEFT, From left, *Razor Charlie* (Danny Trejo), the *Twister's* bartender, director Rodriguez, bouncer Big Emilio (Ernest Garcia), and front door shill Chet (Cheech Marin), scowl for the camera. RIGHT, All hell breaks loose, and the bar's dancers (in this instance, Maria Diaz) lose much of their allure as they undergo an uncanny transformation.

know the intent of a given line and explain that to an actor. Directing *Dusk* made me realize how sparse and how unclear scripts can be. I mean, one line says: 'All hell breaks loose.' Well, what does that mean? I came up with my own idea about what that meant in specific detail, but it might be a completely different idea than what Quentin had in mind when he wrote it. You have to enter into his world and create your own out of the hints on the page. It's a completely different process than working from your own script."

At a pivotal moment in the film, when a main character dies, Rodriguez found himself once again comparing interpretations: "The next thing it says in the script is that one of the characters asks the character who just witnessed the death of a friend, 'How many bullets do you have left?' And obviously it should happen a few beats later, but the way I was pacing the story there was no room for that and it was going to seem kind of strange. A main character just got killed off and now they're asking for bullets? So I played it up for comic effect. I made them look for a moment like they felt really bad about this guy's death, and just when you think he's going to tell the other person that he's sorry he says, 'How many bullets do you have left?' Then they get right back into it because they're still surrounded by monsters and there's no letting up on the action. So, we did take things that were literally written down one way and play them the opposite way."

*Dusk's* vampires are based on myths never before explored in American horror films. "The Aztecs have statues of the vampire goddess who kept the hearts of men around her neck," Rodriguez says. "They seduced and sacrificed people with snakes and dances, and used their blood to feed the sun. They sacrificed at the drop of a hat."

KNB Effects' Greg Nicotero worked closely with Rodriguez in designing every stage of the vampires' metamorphoses. "The KNB guys got a good handle on what I wanted," comments the director. "It's very schizophrenic—not just fangs and the old vampire style, but an anything-goes kind of thing. So, I drew up some freaky drawings and handed them over to KNB, who made three-dimensional versions of them."

The pack of vampires is led by Salma Hayek, who steamed up the screen opposite Antonio Banderas in *Desperado*. "She comes out and does the snake dance with an albino snake, seducing everyone before the killing



begins," Rodriguez says, smiling. "On Salma, we had to put on full prosthetic make-up with contacts. I always knew when she walked on the set because everyone was screaming 'Oh my god!' I won't even say what her name is. She has a mouth in her stomach and chews people's heads off. It's pretty horrible."

"Right off the bat, we shot four days of dialogue, with intense actors pointing guns at each other, and then that Friday we were in the bar shooting the Spanish rock band during the last big party as the vampires are getting ready to kill, and then we shot the monsters. We shot effects in bursts, separated by acting and dialogue scenes, to give KNB a chance to catch up." The director promises

total mayhem in the film's final blow-out, with strippers turning into monsters inside the bar, and more surprises at the door. "Nightmares," he says with a sly smile. "There's some really creepy stuff in this movie. I cram in a lot so that people will get more pleasure watching it a second time—there will be things that they will miss the first time. I hope people will see that we can still experiment, have fun with the medium and twist things around. I'm having fun editing it, playing into the rules of what people think will happen and then slapping them over the head with something else in the next six seconds."

A filmmaker practically since he was old  
*Continued on page 72*





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enough to pick up a camera, Rodriguez made over thirty short films using his family of five sisters and four brothers as actors. "I made a few horror films," he recalls. "Before there was *Halloween 4*, I made a movie called *Halloween 4* for school. On Halloween night they were going to rent a horror film and watch it on the big-screen TV. And I thought, 'Those things are lame, they're all the same. You just wait for the good parts when everyone gets killed. Let's make our own film and have a campus killer just go around killing everybody.' So, I made a little ten-minute film. Nine deaths in ten minutes."

Undaunted by initial rejection from the film program at the University of Texas at Austin, Rodriguez went on to win several awards and film school admission with a video anthology of three of his short films starring members of his family entitled *Austin Stories*. During a break from college, he signed up as an experimental subject at a research hospital testing a cholesterol drug, and left with a finished script and \$3,000, almost half the money he needed to make *El Mariachi*, which went on to win the Sundance Film Festival Audience Award and an Independent Spirit Award for its one-man crew.

Rodriguez's first "Hollywood" film, *Roadracers*, aired earlier this year as part of Showtime's series of AIP 1950's remakes; counting the Rodriguez segment of *Four Rooms*, *Dusk* makes four Rodriguez features for 1995.

From *Dusk Till Dawn* debuts at Christmas-time; then Rodriguez goes to work on *Zorro*, to be produced by Steven Spielberg with *Desperado* star Antonio Banderas in the title role. "There's a difference between movies you like to watch and movies you like to make," Rodriguez says. "The movies that I'm doing now are movies that I like to make. People like John Carpenter, Sam Raimi, George Miller, and early Spielberg made movies that I liked, but that I also would have wanted to have made, as a creative person who has a hand not only in the writing but in the directing and editing and music—they seem like so much fun to piece together and create."

Rodriguez has advice in his recent book about making *El Mariachi*, entitled *Rebel Without a Crew*, that seems to apply not only to filmmaking but to any creative endeavor: "If you want to make movies you should already be starting to make movies. Even if it's on video or flip-cartoon movies—anything, because you've got to learn how to tell a story and how to put images together. You want to learn it on your own. You don't want to learn it in school; and you don't want to learn it in Hollywood because they're both too expensive and they emphasize money over creativity. So, the most you can do, the best you can do is to make a good movie with crude equipment. Then, when you get good equipment, you're going to fly." □

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