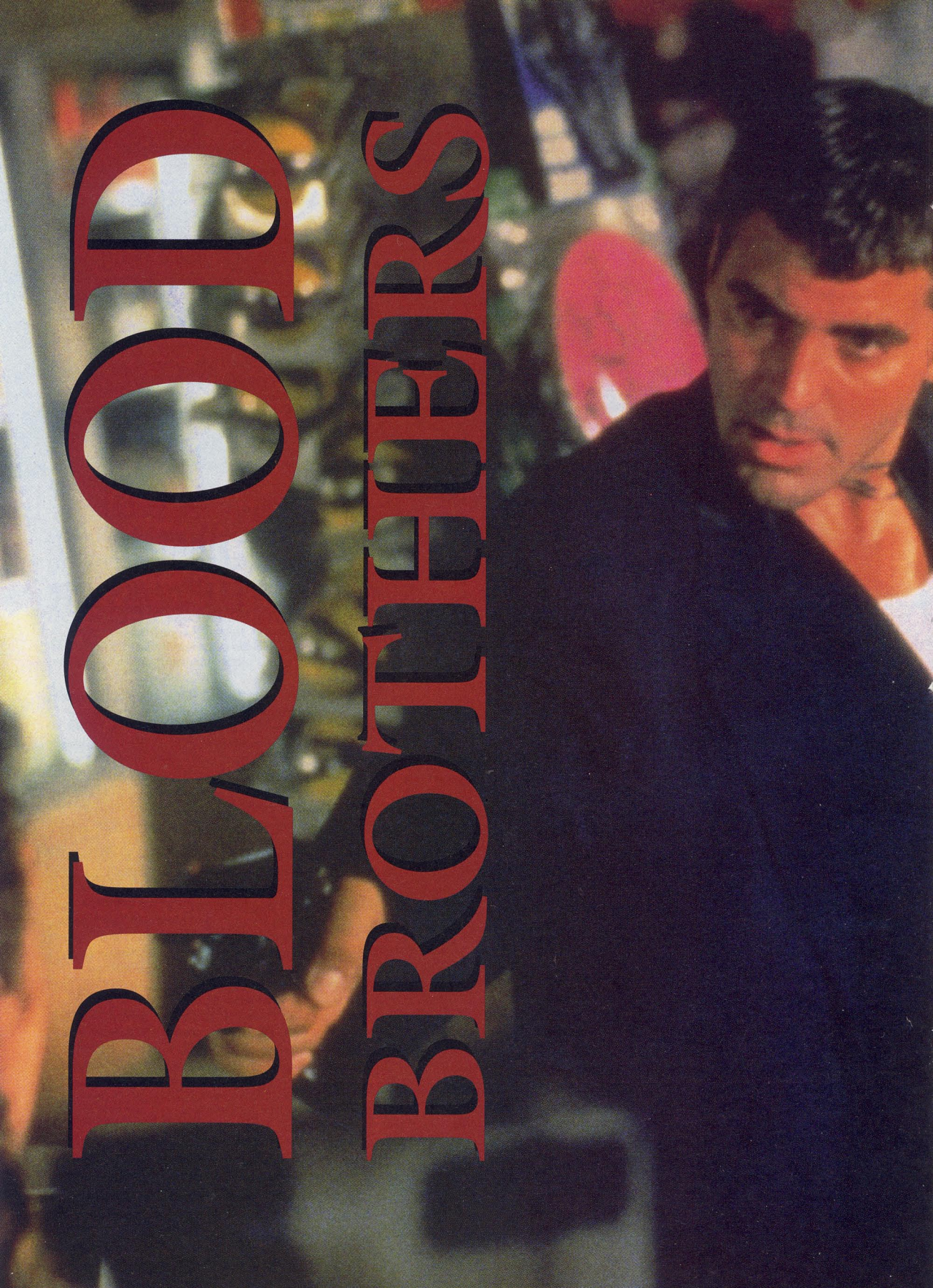
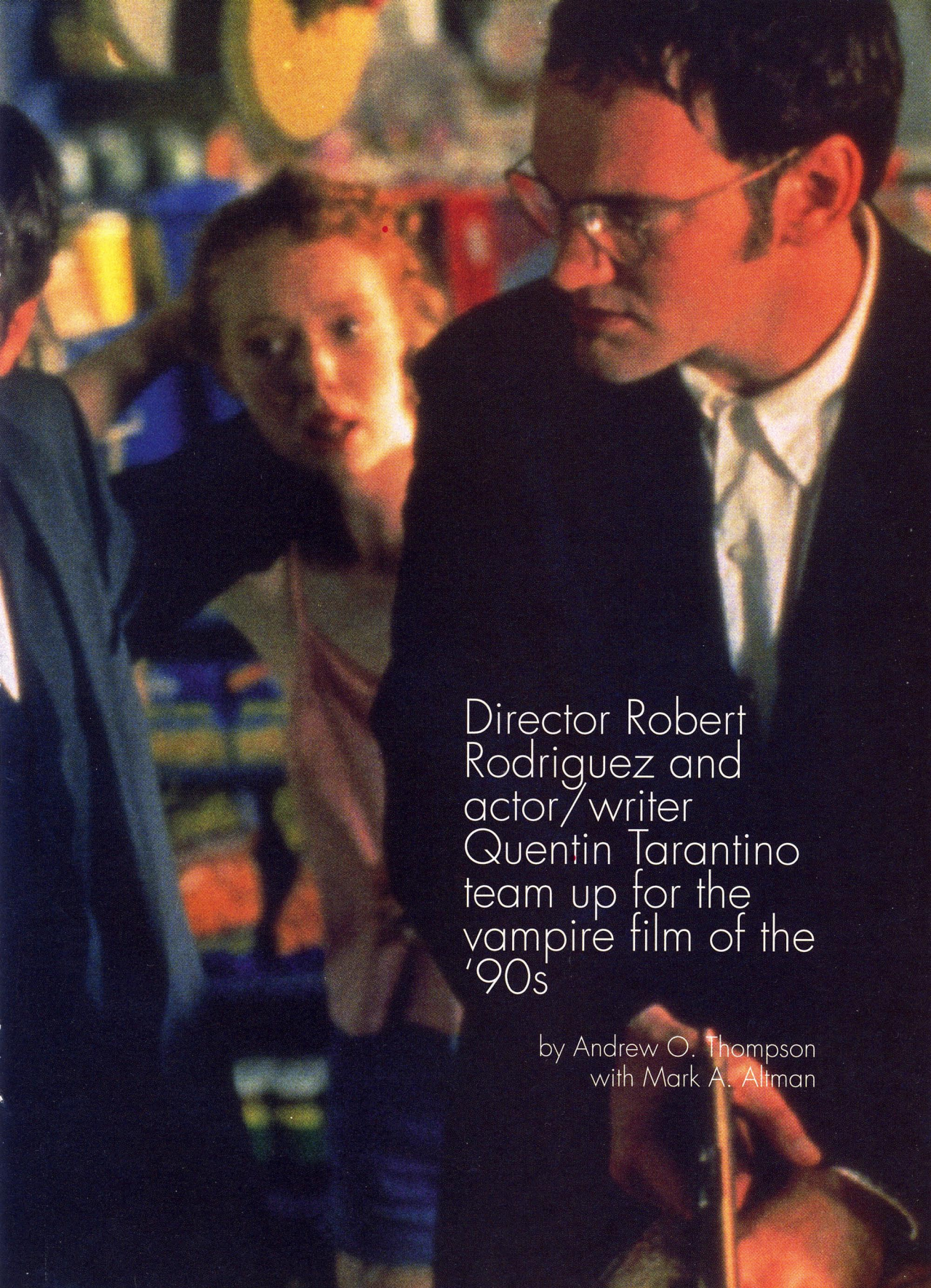


# BLOOD BROTHERS





Director Robert  
Rodriguez and  
actor/writer  
Quentin Tarantino  
team up for the  
vampire film of the  
'90s

by Andrew O. Thompson  
with Mark A. Altman

**Y**ou belly up to the bar of the Titty Twister during happy hour to order a Bloody Mary. But the bartender is somewhat less than accommodating—instead of serving you the

cocktail of your choice, he slits open your jugular vein and drains its crimson contents into a chipped chalice. Then he guzzles it himself. It's enough to make you wish you had stayed home and had a V8.

And that's just for starters as Robert Rodriguez and Quentin Tarantino, two of the hottest independent filmmakers who've found a mainstream niche, become blood brothers with *From Dusk Till Dawn*, a hyperreal descent into a Dante's inferno with the trappings of *Nosferatu*.

This \$18-million horror flick released under the auspices of Miramax's Dimension Films is directed by Rodriguez from a five-year-old Tarantino script originally commissioned by KNB Effects co-founder Richard Kurtzman. It chronicles the exploits of the Gecko Brothers, Richie (Quentin Tarantino) and Seth (*ER*'s George Clooney), as they roam the expanses of Southern Texas on an ultra-violent joyride, pillaging liquor stores and harming anyone who has the misfortune to cross their path. After a former priest and his two kids on vacation run smack into the Brothers Gecko, they're dragged unwillingly into a south-of-the-border sleaze joint, where the freaks quite literally crawl out of the woodwork.

In the wake of the recent resurgence of interest in vampirism following the cinematic realization of Anne Rice's *Interview With the Vampire*, *From Dusk Till Dawn* may seem like yet another effort by Hollywood to take a stab at the well-trodden mythos; after all, slashmeister Wes Craven did a nineties *Blacula* with Eddie Murphy in *Vampire in Brooklyn*, and the always depraved Abel Ferrara has already released his take on vampirism as akin to junkies' jonesing for a fix in *The Addiction*. Although *Dusk*'s screenwriter doesn't deny the film's horrific heritage, Tarantino emphasizes that his film is out to revise the revisionist aesthetic which has lately overcome the vampire genre.

"I find it almost kind of misleading in a weird kind of way to call this a vampire movie, because the way that vampire movies are done now is that there's been this almost *Batman: The Dark Knight* thing where Batman is angsted out and he's all psychological," offers Tarantino in his typically manic style. "Everything is revisionist now, and the same thing is true with the vampires. We have to get into their psyche now and feel the pain of killing all the people and the torture of living thousands of years and everything.

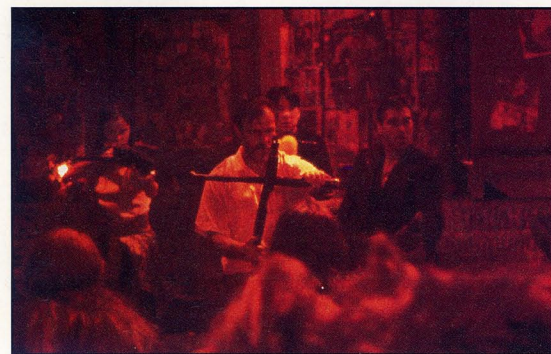
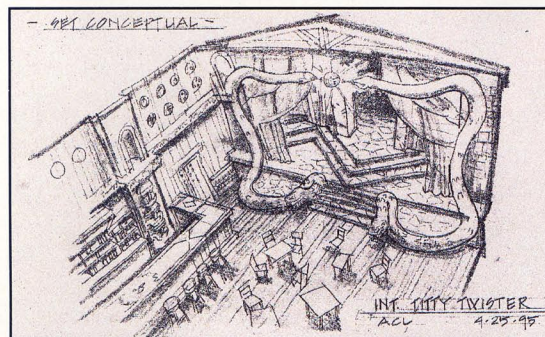
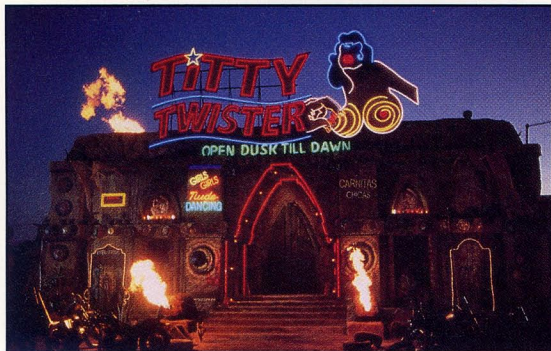
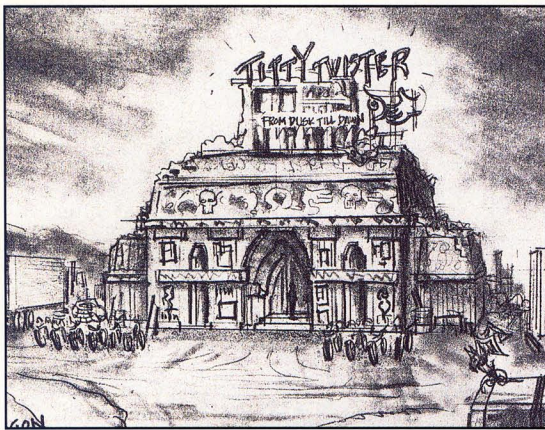
"*Dusk* ain't about any of that. These vampires are a bunch of f--king beast monsters, alright? They don't have a soul, they don't give a f--k," exclaims Tarantino who, true to his ubiquitous nature, is not only the film's screenwriter but is also its executive producer and co-star.

"They're vampires because they exist off of blood, and if they bite you, you'll turn into a vampire. But they're these vampire bat, rat, filthy, odorous creatures—I mean they're just filthy disgusting monsters. They don't have a personality amongst them, and if they do, we don't get a chance to see it in the course of our battle with them. We never identify with our enemies or learn to respect our foes. They're all a bunch of disgusting rodent creatures. And we have no remorse in killing all of them."

Tarantino's dialogue-driven script details action scenes with such comedically pithy descriptions as "And all hell breaks loose..." "Mayhem ensues..." "A feeding frenzy begins..." and is equally as vague as to the whereabouts of the vampires origins. As a result, Rodriguez has dipped into the cultural reservoir of his Mexican heritage (a mainstay of his work ever since shooting short videos as a child) to ground the vampires' back story.

Rodriguez emphasizes that he wished to veer away from the passe trend of angst-ridden Gothic vampires cloaked in black, whether they be restlessly roaming the earth, writhing to the post-punk rhythms of Bauhaus' "Bela Lugosi's Dead" or petrifying 19th-century Transylvanian aristocrats. Hence, the vampire myth in *From Dusk Till Dawn* draws freely from the bloodletting practices of the ancient Aztec and Mayan civilizations.

"There were actual vampire Goddess statues and things during the Aztec times," offers Rodriguez. "What this particular culture did was they would sacrifice to keep the sun alive and honor the vampire goddess. In pictures of statues of her, she has the hearts of 13 men around her neck and she has a skull head. They would seduce people with snakes and then tear them apart and get the blood out because the blood kept the sun alive—so it's a different myth. They're not afraid of the sun, they're actually bringing the sun up every day. So the idea is that this den of vampires in an old Aztec temple has, over the years, been turned into a sleazy bar in Mexico to continue to attract victims. All of the dancing girls are actually dancing a ritual dance before they go and kill everybody. The bikers and truckers are more like martyrs for this world, actually.



**ABOVE:** Production rendering of the Titty Twister. The exterior was shot in Barstow, CA. **BELOW:** The interior of the strip bar/vampire hive with Harvey Keitel (c.) as Jacob Fuller fending off the undead hordes.

"They don't go suck the blood," adds the low-key Rodriguez. "They just rip everybody to pieces. I don't think they even get a chance to eat them because they fight back and get killed pretty quickly and then the victims come back and they're not just fangs—they turn into all kind of horrible creatures. We kind of play on the fear that men have when they pick up a girl in a bar and they wake up the next morning and she's some horrible creature. That's what kind of happens here: they've got a very beautiful girl with them and then they turn around and it's like the most hideous monster they've ever seen. So I see the crew very affected, 'Oh God I had a date like that!' You really get them where they live and breathe."

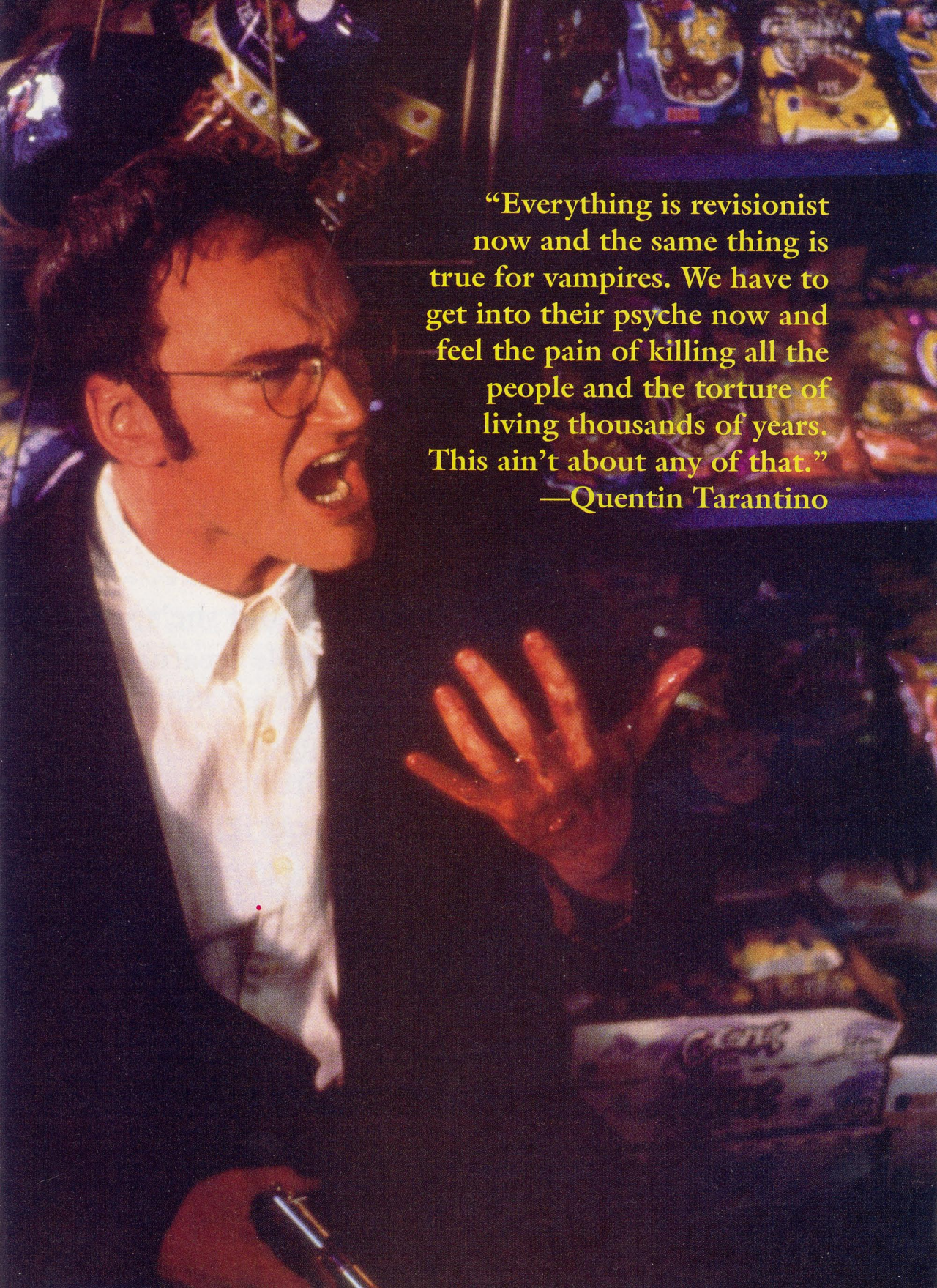
For his Peruvian production designer Cecilia Montel (part of a mostly Latin crew who've become the Rodriguez stable of regular talent), this proved an excellent jumping-off point for architectural designs of the sleazy biker bar (replete with whores and

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**—Director Robert Rodriguez**

riffraff) that is revealed to be a stone temple atop an ancient fossilized pyramid. The set itself is a hodgepodge of decor reflecting its long existence. Victorian curtains blend garishly with turn-of-the-century wood paneling and neon lights. A '70s disco ball hangs above a portal where, framed by two gargantuan red-eyed wooden snakes, the priestess prances prior to the slaughter.

The Titty Twister's walls are replete with centuries of sacrificial souvenirs. Long-decomposed skeletons are embedded in the hall's foundation; truck seats, bottle caps, hubcaps, trinkets and the martyrs' other personal effects adorn the dank interior. These ragtag trimmings are "milagros," a Mexican tradition of honoring saints that can be traced indirectly to the religious blood rituals of these ancient cultures.

"Whenever a god did a miracle for you, or allowed you to have something, they would take something from a person—an effigy—to continue to have the gods give gifts to you," says Venezuelan native Elizabeth Avellan, *From Dusk Till Dawn's* co-producer and Rodriguez's wife of nearly five years. "For example,

A photograph of a man with glasses and a white shirt, looking distressed with his mouth open, in a room filled with bags of snacks. The man is in the foreground, looking towards the right. The background is filled with shelves of various snack bags, including one with a cartoon character. The lighting is dramatic, with strong highlights on the man's face and shirt.

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—Quentin Tarantino

if you get your leg cured, you'll make a little effigy of a wheelchair or a crutch and then hang it by the saint. By the same token, the Mayans and the Aztecs used to take something from the person they were sacrificing as a gift to the gods for having brought them something."

**G**iven the self-trained Rodriguez's penchant for zipping around the set, operating the Steadicam himself and generally working in accordance with his independently honed sensibilities, *From Dusk Till Dawn's* 40-day shooting period seems especially quick. And don't forget the added load of the special effects coordination and all of prosthetics work required. Still, *Dusk* was a cakewalk compared to the schedule that Rodriguez shot some of his earlier films on.

"The movie's going to last 90 minutes and you don't want to spend 90 days shooting 90 minutes because you just feel the weight of something that moves that slow," says Rodriguez. "There's just a real hyperkinetic energy. We don't have to do an *NYPD Blue* and start shaking the cameras as if we're edgy and raw—we're just actually shooting that fast. We're trying to keep the camera smooth, but it's shaking around—it gives it a little more energy and a little more pop. That's what I've always been doing. In shooting faster, I've found the energy in my films has just been stronger."

Such was the case with *Road Racers*, Rodriguez's entry in last summer's ten-part *Rebel Highway* series broadcast on Showtime. A nostalgic hot rod adventure concerning a gringo greaser guitarist and his Latina girlfriend, Rodriguez's *Road Racers* script (written in ten days after the producers asked him to replace the original director who dropped out) was shot in 13 days. Edited in little over two weeks, *Road Racers* averaged some 11 pages and 50 separate set-ups a day—warp speed shooting for even a weekly television series.

Rodriguez says he's trained himself to block out every shot to the point that he needs little additional coverage, as is common practice with his colleagues. (Of course, Rodriguez edits his own movies as well, which makes this easier.) He taught himself the rapid-fire editing trick that gave *El Mariachi* its fluid movements years ago to compensate for his lack of top-of-the-line equipment.

"I learned a lot from shooting my early movies on video," he says. "I would shoot on video and edit between two VCR decks. The way those VCR decks work is that you're recording on one and playing on the other and you press pause to cut out what you don't want. But the pause only lasted five minutes and then it would turn off so you had to find the next shot within five minutes. Since you had to edit like that, you couldn't see the movie until you'd finished editing the whole thing. You had to see each cut before you made it and then make it. Doing that for ten years, I trained myself how to pre-visualize cuts and shots. Now it's become second nature."

Compounding the already frenetic pace of *From Dusk Till Dawn's* shoot is the fact that the production on the non-union production has had to adopt a rather unorthodox schedule that encompasses filming on weekends. This is to accommodate actor George Clooney, who needed to return to the sets of *ER* for one

day a week to begin filming this season's episodes.

"I wanted to take a nice TV actor and turn him into a real mean killer who's on the run," laughs Rodriguez of casting *ER's* Dr. Douglas Ross as the murderous, yet honorable, Seth Gecko.

The congenial Clooney says that he actually finds the pace of *Dusk* a relaxing respite from the *ER* work (which proved more than an adequate training ground for Rodriguez's accelerated schedule).


"This year is the best year of my life," Clooney says. "I'm getting offered any film I want at any studio and they'll hold the film until I'm ready to do it. The world changes. And that's a great thing. Next year it'll be me saying 'Do you want fries with that?' and I have to be prepared for that."

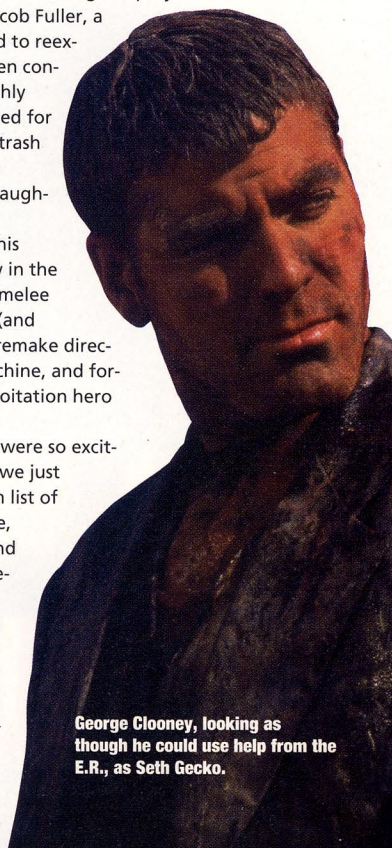
Once the production scored the unexpected coup of Clooney's involvement (thanks to Tarantino/Clooney's mutual agency, William Morris) they pushed up the already accelerated shooting schedule to squeeze it into the actor's short summer hiatus. While we were on the set, the creative team had just slipped a day behind schedule out of Rodriguez' creative penchant for "planned improvisation"—a boon for *From Dusk Till Dawn's* bizarre storyline, which begged taking as many liberties with the script as with its production design.

"None of the stuff we've been shooting in the past four days is even in the script," laughs Rodriguez. "We're making up all these cool things because you go to Movie Hell if you put Tom Savini or Fred Williamson or any one of these guys in a movie and you don't do cool stuff with them. To just shoot the script would just be like 'What's the point?' You know, we've got all these cool actors, let's use them."

Indeed, adding to the already surreal nature of pairing Tarantino and Clooney as fraternal anti-heroes is a kitschy cast of characters which includes Salma Hayek (*Desperado*) as Santanico Pandemonium, the sensual priestess who performs a Salome-like dance with a snake before devouring her prey. Perennial wise guy Harvey Keitel plays Jacob Fuller, a lapsed priest who is forced to reexamine his loss of faith when confronted with these unearthly beasts. Juliette Lewis, famed for a slew of roles as a white-trash debutante, appears in the unlikely guise as Fuller's daughter, Kate.

Coming to the aid of this intrepid (but motley) crew in the midst of the Titty Twister melee are special effects maven (and *Night of the Living Dead* remake director) Tom Savini as Sex Machine, and former football player/blaxploitation hero Fred Williamson as Frost.

Says the director, "We were so excited about the project that we just started to write our dream list of people to put in the movie, keeping a real B-movie kind of quality but trying to elevate it somewhat. We wanted to surprise people by casting people who'd be in a B-movie and then try to turn it into an A-movie with a B-movie sensibility." 



George Clooney, looking as though he could use help from the E.R., as Seth Gecko.