



# SURVIVING SAVAGELAND

BY TERENCE LOOSE

## WANNA MAKE AN INDIE FILM? WANNA BET?

**T**o make a great movie you need three things: a great script; a single director with a singular vision; and other people's money – a lot of it.

Irvine's David Whelan had zero out of three. But he and co-filmmakers Phil Guidry and Simon Herbert made a great movie anyway, at least judging from the fact that it's garnered positive reviews and was shown at this year's Comic-Con International in San Diego and the New Orleans Film Festival.

The movie is *Savageland*, a docu-drama horror that tells the story of a reporter's investigation into the strange, terrifying events of a massacre of all but one resident of a small Mexican border town. And the making of it was, like the plot itself, savage.

"If we had known that it was going to be this tough, I don't know that we would have had the courage to go through with it," says Whelan. "Sometimes naiveté is a filmmaker's best weapon."

Funny enough, they probably did know, or should have. All three are professional writers and producers with credits, even Emmys, to their names. All three graduated from one of the best film schools in the country, UCLA's School of Theater, Film and Television. And all three are pretty smart. But moviemaking, especially zombie movie making, is sort of like a drug: Once you're hooked, you're lucky to get out alive. Or married.

"Even if the movie never garnered any attention, I would still consider it a success because we're proud of the themes and story it tells, the acting is very good, and mostly, because our wives didn't leave us," says Whelan.

If they did, Whelan says he would not have blamed them. Because unlike most indie no-budget horror movies, Whelan says, "We didn't want to do the typical thing where you're

in a single house with bodies falling out of closets." In other words, *Savageland* acted savagely big budget – while staying savagely low-budget.

The big budget part: Shot in 17 locations, including five states and two countries, and boasting a cast of hundreds, *Savageland* has the breadth and scope of a Hollywood movie. And because of their ties to the industry, the three friends were able to attract many professional actors, cameramen, make-up artists, and others to work on the film. Finally, those professionals brought professional equipment, meaning that although the budget of the film was less than a used Buick, the production value shines like a new Ferrari – blood red, of course.

The low-budget part: "Pretty much everything. Basically, it was a recipe for disaster," says Herbert. For instance, the three literally put most of the film on their



A behind the scenes look at the filming of *Savageland*, a docu-drama horror film co-made by Irvine's David Whelan, Phil Guidry and Simon Herbert. The Indie film was shown at San Diego's Comic-Con International and the New Orleans Film Festival.

personal credit cards, breaking Hollywood's cardinal rule: lose other people's money. Second, the film took three years (instead of the planned six months) to finish due to the logistics of lining up locations and schedules for the volunteer army. Third, these three veteran, MFA-holding writers went without a script.

"Yeah, we knew we were breaking some rules. Okay, all of them," laughs Guidry. "But it wasn't like we said, 'Let's be rebels and run around shooting guns in the air.' There was a purpose to ignoring the rules."

For instance, the docu-drama style actually benefitted from the decision to not have a tight script. Fellow UCLA film school grad and award-winning journalist Lawrence Ross essentially plays himself in the lead role of a reporter investigating the mysterious mass murder and does a lot of ad-libbing, based on professional experience. Similarly, the varying degrees of access to equipment led to the varied feel of the shots in the film – exactly as real footage would be realized.

Despite all this "planned chaos," there were some downright dark moments, says Whelan, starting with their very first big shoot. "We had gone to Utah for the first big scene to be shot. It was this little town and pretty much all the residents came out and were helping. They were incredible, and so nice and supportive. We were really excited and spent the entire weekend shooting with a massive volunteer crew," says Whelan. "Then, when we looked at the footage back home, we knew it wasn't what we wanted. That was scary, because I think it woke us up to just how hard this was going to be."

Most shoots, however, came together nicely, in part thanks to the three filmmakers breaking the cardinal one-director rule. "That really worked out," says Guidry. "Because if one of us had a family obligation on a weekend when we also had access to locations and equipment, the others could fill in. It's probably why no real blood was shed. Or divorce attorneys were called." ●

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