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home
contents page

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**Helen Donlon
Interviews
Shawn French**

The Wrong House
will be screened
at 7pm on May 20th 2010
at Nickelodeon Cinema in
Portland, Maine.
The DVD is released on
May 21st 2010 through the
[website](#) and Amazon.

PHOTOS

courtesy Shawn French

- 1.Film Poster
- 2.Shawn French
- 3.Sue Stevens
- 4."Abandon hope all ye who enter here"
- 5.Megan Mathieu as Ashley
- 6.Stacy Ann Strang as Kris
- 7.Shawn French on set as Steve
- 8.Brendan Potter as Derek
- 9."Revenge is sweet"
- 10.Torture
- 11."Off you go"
- 12.On location

Inside The Wrong House

**Helen Donlon
Interviews
Shawn French**

Abandon hope all ye who enter here



Defending your home is a primal survival instinct. Even the most passive animals will kill or die to defend their family and territory. And I wasn't all that passive to begin with. Simply put, I wanted someone's head.

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The Wrong House is a brand new slasher from husband and wife team Shawn French and Sue Stevens. It's a fantasy autobiographical account of revenge, inspired by them having their house broken into in 2008. The result is a trippy no-trespassing sign shot to screen. Made with a tiny budget and the help of a group of skilled and willing friends, *The Wrong House* is a hugely cathartic exercise in extreme revenge fantasy, shot in their own home (the same one, the WRONG one), in Maine, and involving some staggeringly committed stunts performed by the key players

themselves.

I was exhausted from just watching Shawn and the other actors put themselves through the highly visceral scenes of the second part, scoring terrifying LSD-inspired revenge on the rinky-dink chancer kids who they've tracked down, systematically menacing them to painful demise. Intrigued by this somewhat extreme happening I tracked down Shawn to see if he'd calmed down enough from the demonics to guide me through the more detailed story of how the film came about.

Shawn French

It was March 18, 2008, when I got the call at work from my wife Sue. She had just arrived home and found the front door wide open. Our house ransacked. I had left home just 90 minutes earlier, so there was a real concern that they might have still been inside the house. The thought that kept running through my head was, "What if she had walked in on them?" What would those kids have been willing to do to cover their tracks?

Sue and I were fuming as we went through our belongings to see what had been taken. It was immediately clear that we had been robbed by kids. They left photography gear and took a jar of change. They basically wiped out our meds and stole a handful of minor items, including some that belonged to Sue's late husband Shane, who died of cancer a decade earlier.

We put word out through our teenage kids, offering a reward for those responsible. Several sources gave up the same names. My initial idea was to catch one of them and put their head on a stick in the corner of our yard as a warning to the others. But it turns out that's illegal.

So we tracked down the thieves online and gave them a chance to return our things. If it came back by 5 p.m. on Friday we wouldn't turn their names over to the police. Really, all we needed back was Shane's stuff. The rest was replaceable.

Sue and I tried to stay calm during the three days before the deadline, believing they'd take the chance to undo a stupid mistake they were caught at. We were wrong. The deadline came and



London Grip's
Film & Sound
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Helen Donlon
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and
is the author of
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film director **Tom Kalin's**
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went and we were left wondering, "Now what?"

Susan and Steve

Backing up a bit, Sue and I had been developing a pair of serial-killer characters since we first met in 2000 (we were living in Chicago at the time). Even before we started seriously dating, we knew it would be a blast to play husband-wife serial killers together in a film. We're both pretty twisted and coming up with these characters was one of our first real bonding moments. The basic premise was, "What if we were three notches crazier? What type of killers would we be?"



We developed Susan and Steve, who sincerely believe themselves to be agents of Karma. Not karma in any mystical sense, but as a manifestation of the law of averages. As they explain to one victim in the film:

"There are a lot of crazy people in this world. If you go through your life trampling on everyone who crosses your path, eventually you're going to step on the wrong toe. Crawl through the wrong window. Rob the wrong house. Eventually you're going to piss off someone like us, and that rarely ends well for someone like you. We are karma."

They believe that karma only works if there are people like themselves who kill off those who need to be killed. They pick off paedophile priests, wife beaters, child abusers and rapists. And they punish them according to their crimes. Susan and Steve are fully convinced that they're making the world a better place. And they're probably right. They never kill at random. They never kill the innocent. They only prey on those whose death is dictated by karma.

We had been fleshing out these characters for years, figuring out their first kill, how they got started, developing their rules. We didn't know what story they belonged in or how to use them, but we had these characters ready to hit the ground running.

Back to 2008, the deadline has just passed and we're furious. If it was an adult who robbed me, I grab a bat, go get our stuff and I'm back before dinner. No problem. But you can't do that to high-school kids, no matter how much they deserve it.

Then suddenly: "What would Susan and Steve do?"

I don't even remember which of us said it first, but there was a moment of stunned silence as it hit us both. In a lifetime of writing, I had never experienced a moment of realization that powerful before. We desperately needed something positive to throw our energy into and this story really saved us.

We both immediately knew we were shooting a movie. Filmed at our home, with Sue and I as our serial-killer characters. We had just lived out the first half of the story and decided we'd keep the script as close to the actual events as possible. But once that deadline passes at 5 p.m. on Friday, the story takes off in a whole different direction.

Sue and I talked story, then I locked myself up and typed as fast as my fingers would go. By the end of the weekend, I had a treatment in hand and was starting on the screenplay.



Writing

Sue and I put the story together and I knocked out the script. She was reading pages and giving feedback daily throughout the process, so while I did the writing it was a collaboration every step of the way. I've been writing full- or part-time for 20 years (I'm 39). I spent a decade as a stand-up comic and comedy writer in my teens and early 20s. I spent 3.5 years as a newspaper (Windham Independent in Maine) film critic and sports editor. And I've been writing scripts for twenty years, although this is the first one to reach the big screen.

As much as the story for *THE WRONG HOUSE* just fell into our laps, it was a tougher script to write than I expected. The problem was, I was still angry. So in the first draft the thieves were all obnoxious little punks, which of course makes for a terrible story.

I had to really get over that in order to make those characters into real people. You can't effectively write a character unless you, as the writer, empathize with it. And I didn't want to do that. I wanted to hate them, not understand them. There's a scene in the film that takes place the night before the deadline. The thieves are gathered to argue about what they're going to

Audrey PO POWELL.
Together they formed
Hipgnosis,
creating images which have
entered our familiar visual
lexicon.

LITERATURE
Helen Donlon interviews
ROGER TINNELL about
FEDERICO GARCIA LORCA

do.



Writing that scene, I basically had to argue every possible viewpoint. It was tough, but it led me to the true beauty of the story. The entire film exists in a moral grey area and that's a really fun place to play as a writer. There are no clear-cut good guys or bad guys. Sure, Susan and Steve are psycho, but they really have a valid point. They didn't start the fight. And once I allowed myself to humanize and develop the thief characters, they became varying shades of grey as well. Only one of them really wanted to rob the house and the others were sort of dragged along to various degrees.

After the premiere, several people mentioned to me that they weren't entirely sure who to root for. I love that so much.

Once the first draft of the script was done, we knew we really had something special. What had started as sort of a traditional horror-revenge flick had shifted into a much deeper story about karma and redemption. A brutal, bloody story to be sure. But a movie that gives you plenty to think about.

Simply put, we had to make this movie. If I had to shoot it for \$100 on my little Panasonic 100B, so be it. Once the story clicked into place, there was nothing that would stop us from making our film.

Fortunately, we didn't have to go that route. Once word spread about what had happened and what we were doing about it, help poured in from all corners. Everyone who read the script wanted in.

We found an amazing FX artist named Eric Anderson who had somehow never gotten his break. He did incredible work for us, including prosthetics so accurate you could pull the actor's fingerprints off them. Eric's career has taken off since this movie and he has started up his own FX group The Shoggoth Assembly.

A director I had worked with previously agreed to be my cinematographer and co-direct with me. (He doesn't put his name on films unless he has final cut or I'd talk him up by name. He gave us such beautiful footage to work with.)

Local production companies Emptyhouse Film and Motion Media hooked us up with gear, allowing us to shoot in HD with professional equipment.

Suddenly our little film wasn't so little anymore.



Locations

Aside from one scene we filmed on the nearby Saco River and two indoor scenes shot at a friend's house, we filmed the entire movie at or around our home. We live in a town called Limerick, about a half hour from civilization, in the western woods of Maine (farthest northeast state).

We used our house as Steve and Susan's home, which really cranked up the energy. We had the actors break in through the same window the actual thieves used. The wounds were still so fresh at that point. Filming these people breaking in and rummaging through our things really pissed us off. Sue didn't even want to watch, initially. It was too real.



Using our own place was also a huge benefit during pre-production. Months in advance of shooting, we converted our basement into Susan and Steve's torture chamber, complete with a weapon wall. Almost all of our outdoor locations were within walking distance of our house. As I was writing the script, being able to get up and walk through the locations was invaluable.

I also trained like a freak for six months before the shoot, dropping 30 pounds for the role of Steve, a former boxer. I trained in-character, in the basement torture room for 1-2 hours a day. Pushing myself so hard, and doing it in that disturbing environment, is how I found the character of Steve.

Casting

Casting really should have been a problem, because I had unreasonably high expectations of everyone. In addition to the standard 18-20 hour shooting days, THE WRONG HOUSE is an extremely physical film. Every actor in this movie has at least one scene where they suffer. Whether getting physically and emotionally battered, water-boarded or dealing with insanely claustrophobic FX shots, no one got out of this shoot easy.

I knew right from the start that we weren't faking the action. You can always tell when a movie is faking it. They do that quick-cut crap so you can't really see what's happening. When I'm watching a movie, I want to see the action. I want to feel the impacts.

We warned everyone at the first audition that they would be going home bruised. It was a rough, unpaid, uninsured shoot. They knew the script was brutal and that we'd be coming up with new things to throw at them as we went. They knew that Sue and I were deliberately looking to blur the lines. That our anger was real.

During Brendan Potter's audition (he plays our lead, Derek), I had him slam me into a cement wall a couple times. Hard. I knew he and I would be going at it onscreen and needed to know he was capable of using the kind of force we needed. During one stunt sequence, he'd be my eyes as I flew backward over a steep, steep hill. If he lines up even a little off-target, I miss the mat and it's a bumpy ride down 50 feet of rocks. A whole lot of trust there.



We needed a tough crew of actors. I had seen our lead actress, Stacy Ann Strang (Kris), in two previous films and I knew she was a pro who could anchor this cast. We were continually blown away by their group chemistry and how much each actor really stepped up when it was their moment to shine. An incredibly talented, fearless and dedicated group of actors. They gave everything they had, physically and emotionally, to bring this film to life. We can never thank them enough.

I knew I wanted an elaborate LSD sequence, but I was still teaching myself the software as I edited the film. So I brought in Matt Perez to handle our trip scenes and he absolutely crushed it. His work took this film to another level.



Our cast was definitely up for getting banged around, but there's only so much you can do to other people. I wanted stunts that we didn't really have the time or budget to do safely. So that meant doing them myself. The price for realism is pain and I was happy to pay it. On the final day of the shoot, I broke three ribs, tore a hamstring and absolutely demolished myself head-to-toe. I was a bruise Dalmatian. I had to sleep in a recliner for six weeks because I couldn't lie down. But the wounds were temporary and the footage is forever, so that was a bargain in my eyes.

The Shoot

The principal shoot was on a pair of three-day weekends (Saturday-Monday), Sept. 13-15 and Sept. 20-22, 2008. We had the cast and crew live on set during the shoot. The first weekend we shot all scenes before the deadline passes in the story. So the first weekend was the break-in and the stalking scenes, with Steve and Susan freaking them out. The second weekend was non-stop carnage.

We've spent about \$5,000 on the film so far, but we did the principal shoot for \$1,500. Most of that was food, gas money and effects. Another advantage of shooting in our house was serving real meals. Good food makes all the difference on a set.

In early 2009, we shot the opening scene, all the other bits and pieces we needed and a music video for our end-credit song, Damien Zygot's "Chaos Theory". It uses a bunch of footage from



the movie and it's on the DVD.

Through this whole process, I've been working a full-time job doing soulless office crap. On weekdays, I'd get up early and edit until noon. Go to work, come back and see Sue for an hour or so. She goes to bed, I go back to editing until my eyes won't stay open. Catch five hours of sleep and repeat. This movie has been my life for the past two years.



Music

We had such fortune with music. Sue grew up with an incredibly talented musician named Tim Butcher. Plays every instrument, in-home studio and he's crazy smart. Tim's out in Washington state and he and I had never met, although I'd been hearing Tim stories forever. Initially, he was going to record a couple pieces of music for us. But once he got going, he was on a roll and delivered an incredible full score. We talked about the story and he understood the feel of this film. Tim had an uncanny ability to take a few vague adjectives from me and turn them into exactly the music I was asking for. There is a piano piece at the end of the film that is just beautiful. We finally met face-to-face when Tim flew in for the premiere in Westbrook, Maine. We're now very close friends.

Damien Zygotte provided our end-credit song "[Chaos Theory](#)," which sounds like it was written for our film. The way it matches our closing shot, the lyrics, the themes . . . it's uncanny. I was blown away the first time I heard the song. Damien also contributed several creepy ambient tracks that he created for our film. He has an uncredited cameo in the LSD scene. We have a song ("Rasta Man") by the Maine reggae group Stream Reggae, who I love a whole lot. And we got the rights to a CD that's been in my regular rotation for over a decade, "August of Gentlemen" by The Motengata Band. They were a small, local band who broke up in the '90s, but I've loved this disc forever. I always thought it would be great movie music. I tracked down the lead singer, Keith Dover, and he was totally onboard. Their music is all over this movie.



We had a script that we all really liked and I had the actors memorize it as if we were shooting word-for-word, although with the freedom to tweak lines here and there. Then once we got on set, we put the script aside and had them improvise. Tightly structured improv worked well for us. Because they knew where the scene had to go and had their lines to fall back into if needed, you got the spontaneity and energy of improv while still having the structure and depth of a tight script. We were also reworking things constantly. I'm always open to good ideas and we had a great collection of twisted minds coming up with new ways to crank up the brutality. Our FX artist Eric Anderson and make-up artist Kristina Ellery were incredible finds. The two of them together could build anything. It gave us a whole lot of freedom.

I'm a story guy. If you don't have that, the rest doesn't much matter. I love a good story in any genre. Sure, "The Shining" was a masterpiece visually. But that's not why I obsessed over it. I love that movie because the story crawls up in the back of your brain and fucks with you. We were exploring dark, dark territory with this film. Shooting in our house jacked up our emotions and it became very easy to blur the lines between reality and fantasy. The actors knew the energy coming at them was real. We also improvised a lot in the torture scenes, so they often had no idea what was next. Everything was so real and so intense that no one had time to think about acting. We weren't acting out scenes so much as creating these very real and dark and deeply disturbing experiences, which we were fortunate enough to capture on film.

Sue is a special level of creepy in this movie. One of the perks of writing dialogue for the person



you know best in all the world is that we could run lines constantly. So we had six months of pre-production to find exactly the right little touches to bring out the creepy. Once the cameras rolled, Sue was chilling. I wrote the lines and even I was stunned at times. She brought such incredible emotional honesty and raw energy to the part. Equal parts vulnerable, terrifying and sweet. It's an unnerving combination, especially when you throw in a touch of really dark humour here and there.

The energy when we wrapped on Sept. 22, 2008, was incredible. We had just been through three straight sleep-deprived days of physical and emotional torment. Everyone was banged up, exhausted and convinced that we had just created something special. I was a wreck physically, but I couldn't have been happier. We had our movie.

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