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New Blood

Giving Filmmakers Hope and Money

**ART AND INDUSTRY
BY AMY TAUBIN**

In both his films and his person, Larry Fessenden defies expectations. With the independent film world now driven by marketing conventions imported whole hog from Hollywood, it's no wonder Fessenden fears falling through the cracks. Even he isn't sure what to put on the poster for *Habit*.

Three years in the making, *Habit* is "the other Downtown female vampire flick," the one that was just starting postproduction when Abel Ferrara's *The Addiction* and Michael Almereyda's *Nadja* bombed at the box office. Fessenden never worried that the film, which he wrote, directed, and edited, and in which he also stars, might be mistimed. "In my own twisted mind, I believed that since *Habit* was a remake of a feature I made on video in 1980 when I was at NYU film school, it had preceded all of them. It even preceded *The Hunger* as an updated realism-based re-vamping of the vampire story." Try telling that to the festivals (Toronto, Sundance, Berlin) and the dozens of distributors and sales agents that passed on the picture.

To be perfectly honest, having mistaken *Habit* for an exploitation venture, I avoided it until Fessenden won this year's Someone To Watch Award, a \$20,000 cash prize jointly created by the Independent Feature Project West and Swatch watches. The award is given to "a filmmaker of exceptional talent and unique vision who hasn't yet received sufficient recognition for her or his work." Like the previous recipients Lodge Kerrigan and Christopher Munch, Fessenden fits the bill disconcertingly well. Accepting his award, Fessenden, who looks like a runty Jack Nicholson minus one front tooth, said the check would go to pay his crew, who worked on deferment to support his filmmaking, um, er, habit.

Habit, which I finally saw in a new 35mm incarnation, turns out to be the most vivid of the Downtown vampire movies—as evocative of New York-style paranoia as *Rosemary's Baby*, *Bad Lieutenant*, or *Taxi Driver*. "In a way, it's too bad that people know about the vampire aspect in advance, because otherwise, for the first half hour, you wouldn't know what kind of movie it is," says the sweetly perverse Fessenden. "Maybe it's a movie about

a drunk. It's designed to have a cumulative effect. It's about what you project onto it." And in fact, I didn't think *Habit* was the least bit scary—until the screening was over and I found myself, in broad daylight, fleeing across University Place, to avoid a group of perfectly ordinary people gathered outside a pizza place.

Fessenden grew up in a well-to-do Upper East Side family. He went to prep school at Andover, didn't graduate, got his G.E.D., and enrolled at NYU, where he was torn between filmmaking and acting. In 1985, he set up Glass Eye Pix, an indie production company. Under the Glass Eye banner, he directed *The Impact Addict Videos* (a collaboration with high-risk performance artist David Leslie), *Hollow Venus* (1989), a one-hour video based on actress Heather Woodbury's experiences as a go-go dancer, and *No Telling* (1991), a smart, spare, skewed update of the Frankenstein story. Otherwise known as "the animal rights, anti-pesticide movie," *No Telling* was never released in the U.S. "Harvey Weinstein was interested," says Fessenden, "but then he decided that it

was too complicated to market."

Tapped by Kelly Reichert for a leading role in her directorial debut *River of Grass*, Fessenden stayed on to edit the film as well. "By the end, it was

Berlin. And now we're into the spring of 1996. We had a great screening at Indie Night at the Walter Reade, but it was typical of *Habit*'s timing that every-

one in the industry was in Cannes so none of the distributors saw it with that fabulous, enthusiastic audience. I sent tapes to the usual suspects from October to Sony Classics to Trimark and to about 30 foreign sales agents, and they all passed."

Based on the response at the Walter Reade screening, Fessenden decided to trim a few minutes out of the film and do some work on the sound before bumping it up to 35mm. "It got to be a humiliation that I was still working on *Habit* every day. I finally finished the 35mm print in 1997." (Total production cost: \$190,000, plus deferments.) "Meanwhile, Facets had been asking us to show it in their art house in Chicago. We opened there on April 21. Roger Ebert came back to see the new cut and we got a full-fledged review from him and others, and they were pretty good." Fessenden's being modest—they were money reviews for sure. "Then the next day I got the Swatch award. I felt that after working for 17 years, I'd finally been welcomed into the film community." Fessenden hopes to get *Habit* into theaters in time for Halloween.

As of yet no distributor has bit.

Among *Habit*'s champions is Peter Broderick, a long-time advocate of no-budget filmmaking who heads the Swatch awards committee. Broderick, who has been my screening buddy at the IFFM for nearly a decade, has just launched Next Wave Films, financed by the Independent Film Channel and dedicated to providing finishing funds for ultra-low-budget (under \$200,000) English-language indies from all over the world. Next Wave can supply up to \$100,000 for four films every year. Only films that have completed principal photography will be considered. Next Wave will also serve as a producers' rep on the films it finances, helping filmmakers devise festival strategies and secure distribution.

"We're looking for exceptionally talented filmmakers who are not only working on terrific movies that have real theatrical potential, but who, we feel, will make many more." Next Wave is setting up offices in Santa Monica. For information, call 310-392-1720. **V**



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