

## AN INTERVIEW WITH KELLY HUGHES



Originally published in *Film Panic Magazine Issue 1, Summer 2013* by Daniel Fawcett & Clara Pais

In the early '90s when grunge was taking hold of American teens and *Twin Peaks* was airing on TV, Kelly Hughes was creating his own piece of lo-fi strangeness with *Heart Attack Theatre*, a home-made, no-holds-barred trash soap opera which aired on Public Access TV. This was a show where addiction, betrayal, death and sordid love affairs all came together in an over-the-top, over-acted, charity shop-costumed melodrama. In these episodes, anything could happen and it usually did, often with a supernatural twist. Characters became possessed by demons, addicted to drugs, driven by a desire for revenge, and even cursed. Emotions were expressed by manic screaming, shouting or laughter, if possible all three at the same time.

Kelly churned out these messed up morality tales every week for three years using a cast of friends and locals in roles which were not limited by age, looks, sex or skill. The key to being a star in Kelly's films was willingness. Ernest Rhoades, one of Kelly's main performers, puts it in a nutshell, 'what makes Lucky Charm Productions so unique is that when someone is being cut with glass, or showing their nutsack or being faux-injected with drugs or pissed on...it's being done with love.' Kelly and his cast are amateurs in the truest sense of the word, doing it for the love of making films, of dressing up and performing. They clearly had a great time doing it and thought nothing of what would be considered by many as unprofessional or ridiculous. They relished the opportunity of giving free reign to their creativity and it often took them to unexpected and illuminating places, as another collaborator says, 'from the gutter we learn more about ourselves'.

Kelly went on to make two feature films, the David Lynch inspired *Twin Cheeks* and the wonderfully wild, living dead drag queen romp *La Cage Aux Zombies*. The joy of watching Kelly's films is for the pure over-the-top outrageousness of them and the uncensored creativity that is so often in bad taste but all the better for it. Hughes has recently completed *Heart Attack: The Early Pulse Pounding Cinema of Kelly Hughes*, a documentary looking back at the making of these early films, featuring interviews with the key cast who take us through their memories of the mad days and frenetic creativity of Heart Attack Theatre.



Kelly Hughes with the Landers sisters in LA

### **When did *Heart Attack Theatre* start and how did it come about?**

*Heart Attack Theatre* debuted in May of 1991. The whole Seattle grunge rock scene was starting to explode. But I was working a shitty day job. And in the previous two years I had written and directed two musicals for the Playwright's Festival at Seattle's New City Theatre. That was my main creative outlet at the time. The first piece was called *Lucky Charm: A Musical*. And that later became the name that I produced *Heart Attack Theatre* under – Lucky Charm Studio.

I had never written a musical before. But in high school, I did play clarinet. So I guess it gave me enough confidence to think I could write out notes on sheet music. And I had a friend who had an old Fender Rhodes keyboard. I composed everything on that and I really enjoyed it. This was back when Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Phantom of the Opera* first came out. So everyone wanted to create the next gothic musical blockbuster. Mine was more *Little House on the Prairie* meets *Sex and the City* with a ghostly horror twist. I was so hooked on musicals that I wrote another one. An operetta, actually. It was called *Paul Bunyan: An American Tragedy*. Sort of an origins story. It was set against a fundamentalist early American backdrop. And Paul Bunyan was branded an abomination by the local minister, yet lusted after by the women for his height and overall big-ness. It also has supernatural overtones. It was insanity to attempt something like this with no budget, no band, no anything. But we pulled it off, clumsily, ridiculously? But we had some genuine moments too. And it taught me to never give up.

But after two musicals, I was completely burnt out. Then in the fall of 1990, I was asked to videotape a cross-country bicycle trip for an ex-lover. Seattle to New York at twenty miles per hour. And when we returned, I took the footage, and made it into a documentary. This was on Super VHS, which was a big deal back then. Nothing like today's digital camcorders and technology. But to be able to edit something using only your camera, and one video deck, was a revelation. Still, it took forever to go through footage. And once you made an edit, you were pretty much committed to it.

But nine months later, I'm sitting answering phones, working at this shitty office job to pay the rent. And I'm at a point where I think, 'I've got to create something. I've got to do something. Or else I'll die at this shitty job. And I'll never leave a mark on the world.' So on my lunch break, I took the bus to the Public Access TV studio, filled out the forms, and said I wanted to create a weekly half-hour suspense anthology called *Heart Attack Theatre*.

### **How many episodes were there? How long did it run for?**

33 episodes total. It ran for five seasons (2 1/2 years.)



During the first season, I created a new episode every week. During the second season, it was part reruns, part new episodes. And by the third season they were all reruns. I was actually a replacement series. The season started at the beginning of April, but someone dropped out. So I was at the right place at the right time and ready to roll into production immediately. But it was only because I had access to the video equipment from the bike documentary that I could do any of this.

### **It must have been a wonderful moment when the first episode aired, can you remember how that felt to be watching something you had made playing on TV?**

It was exciting knowing the first episode was airing, but I didn't have cable TV so I didn't actually watch it when it was first shown.

But back then, way before YouTube, it seemed like a big deal to have your video broadcast on TV. There was a feeling that people would be channel surfing, looking for something on regular TV, and then they'd see your footage, and be stopped in their tracks, and say, "Wow. This is way better than the crap on network TV." Of course, there was a lot of crap on Public Access TV too. But it had a lot of charm because it was competing against the Big Boys. Unlike YouTube, which is more of an even playing field because there's lots of home-made stuff on there. It was exciting to think your show was playing at the same time as a show from one of the big TV networks. And that maybe, just maybe, you were pulling viewers away from them.

As for the content and execution... I think I was aware of my limitations. I was a one-man crew: directing, lighting, audio, costumes, props, sets, location scouting. And of course, writing. And this was all in addition to a full-time job. So I learned that the top priority was getting actors to commit. Scheduling them and getting them to show up, on-time, ready to work. Then all the other details... we just dealt with them as they came up.

### **What was the reaction like from other viewers?**

The actors were recognized by strangers in public. 'Hey! Didn't you give birth to a snake on that TV show?' But I had no way to gauge how many people were actually watching. They didn't have Nielson Ratings for Public Access. The best reaction was from the playback operators down at the station. And they said they liked my stuff and started putting more and more of it in their permanent archive to show when they had gaps in their schedule. Also, an actor from New York, who saw the show while on vacation in Seattle, contacted me. He said he liked my show, and wanted to work with me. So I wrote *La Cage Aux Zombies* for him and we shot that initial footage during his summer vacation in August of 1993.

### **Talk us through the process of creating an episode of *Heart Attack Theatre*. How long did it take to write, shoot and edit an episode?**

After a few episodes, I hit my stride and started doing my casting first, and wrote almost all of my scripts knowing those specific actors would be playing those characters I created for them. So I'd contact them during the week,

and by the end of the week, I'd usually have that episode cast. And during my lunch on Friday, I'd start writing the script, and sometimes, I'd actually write the script that Saturday morning, a few hours before the actors would arrive. I worked well under pressure. And for about 90% of the episodes, we did all the shooting that Saturday and Sunday. And I started the editing that Sunday night. Then would edit the rest on Monday and Tuesday night when I got home from work. Then I'd turn in the master tape to the Public Access station on Wednesday. And they would show it that Friday night. It was an extremely tight schedule. But without those deadlines, I don't think I would have had such a big output.

### **Describe for us a couple of your favourite episodes/stories from the series?**

My favourite episode is 'Sisters'. It's the story of a psychic nun and her lascivious twin sister. I love the Evil Twin sub-genre in horror. It can be a cliché if it's used as an implausible plot twist. But it's also a fun filmmaking challenge to shoot scenes where a single actress plays both sisters. And, with the use of a stand-in, if we can make the viewer believe it's actually two different people playing those parts, it's quite a triumph. I used one of my most talented regulars, Barbara, to play both twins. So I enjoyed creating this acting challenge for her. And I think we avoided cliché by establishing the twin relationship immediately. It wasn't used as a surprise element.

But at its heart, 'Sisters' turned out to be about sibling rivalry and unfinished childhood business, and retribution. In the story, the lascivious sister has had an affair, and her husband catches her in the act, threatening to divorce her and cut off her lavish lifestyle. Her sister, the nun, has the psychic ability to erase memories from people's minds. And yes, this was twenty years before *Inception*, but a similar concept (but with a zero budget.) And to persuade her psychic twin, the lascivious sister lays on the ultimate guilt trip, reminding her of the time that the nun, out of spite, removed the memories of their dead mother from the lascivious sister's mind. This was also the act that led to the psychic sister joining the convent, thinking she could do no further harm there. But she is still tormented with guilt. And even though she doesn't want to cover up her sister's adulterous behaviour, she agrees to mess with her brother-in-law's mind to gain absolution from her sister. So they exchange clothing, and trade places. But the twist is, once the nun is back in the civilian world, we discover she has always been in love with her brother-in-law and can't bear the thought that her sister will return, and continue to cheat on him. So instead of erasing his memories, she goes back to the convent, erases the memories of the lascivious sister, turning her into a vegetable, leaving her there to live out the rest of her life as a nun, and goes back to live her life as the wife of her brother-in-law. So it has everything I love in a horror movie: psychic power, an evil twin, the Catholic Church, sexual wantonness, catty dialogue, and even a reference to a Bette Davis movie (*Dead Ringer*).

Another favourite episode is 'An Inconvenient Whore'. In it, a female prostitute discovers a male prostitute is already booked in her hotel room. But because of a big insurance convention, the hotel is full, and they both need the room. So they rotate their customers, each one rounding up business while the other is using the room. Then the male prostitute learns that the female is only turning tricks because of a family curse. And sets out to free her from the curse by performing an exorcism using her pimp's heart (the pimp also happens to be her brother). There is suspense and gore but what I like best is the growing fondness between the two characters and how the actors played it so earnestly with such a crazy story going on. I think that was one of my greatest strengths with all of *Heart Attack Theatre*. Actors may have been over-the-top at times. But overall, they took these crazy situations seriously and let the crazy plots speak for themselves.

### **From the documentary it seems like you put your actors through some strange and sometimes gruelling experiences, how did you find so many willing and eager victims?**

The short answer is: I wrote fun parts for them to play, and actors appreciate having something interesting to act in. But even more so, the people who did the outrageous stuff got noticed and are still remembered today. I used to joke that I would cast anyone at least once, that their first time on Heart Attack Theatre was their actual audition. If they were easy to work with, and if I liked their performance, chances are I would work with them again. And if they had few limits on-camera, they were even more employable. But looking back, I don't think I made them do anything too extreme. Some tasteful nudity a few times. Jumping into cold water. Demonic orgasms.

The one time I think I actually put someone in physical danger was when I was doing a photo shoot at night, on top of my apartment building. And my model had finished two bottles of champagne and I had her stand near the edge of the roof to pose. So, in retrospect, I'm glad she didn't fall and splat on the cement below. But if she had, she



would have died happy. People enjoy being the focus of my lens, I give them strong direction and my full attention. It's addictive.

**It's obviously very much a no-budget production fuelled by passion and imagination. Tell us about some situations in which you had to utilise resourcefulness and creativity due to lack of money and hi-tech equipment?**

Our number one resource was showing up at locations without permission or permits. I call it hit-and-run filmmaking. You show up with your actors, they get into position, I'm off to the side with my jacket covering my camcorder. So basically, no one else around knows we're doing a shoot and we get the scene done so quickly, that by the time we arouse suspicion, we're already getting the hell out of there.

I remember a shoot I did at The Seattle Center. That's where The Space Needle is. They used to have a children's amusement park there. It had a carnival atmosphere and it was either Mother's Day or Father's Day. And I had this guy dressed up in full drag. He was in a short orange mini-dress and blond wig. He looked like a cross between Jodie Foster in *Taxi Driver*, and that serial killer in *Silence of the Lambs*. And I stayed pretty far away from him, keeping my camcorder hidden. And as he walked down the midway, parents would literally grab their kids, yanking them out of his radius. I thought he was going to get beat up. But I wanted a shot of him riding the kiddie choo choo train. And the ride operator refused to let him on but my actor persisted, and got on anyway (he did buy a ticket after all.) But in the final footage, you see all these parents and children crammed into these little cars. But my actor is all alone in his. No one would dare sit near him.

We also got some great footage at Sea-Tac Airport. This was pre-9/11. But even so, I don't think we would have gotten permission to shoot there, so we just showed up. Back then, you could actually walk right up to the security check, even if you didn't have a plane ticket yourself. So I was filming two actors (from afar) and had told them to go through the metal detector. One did. But the other was holding back. He was wearing full S&M black biker leather from head to toe. A look that would get him an immediate TSA strip search nowadays. But back then, nothing happened, except for the fact he never went through the metal detector.

'Why didn't you go through it,' I said, when we all met up.

'I have a gun on me.'

I knew this guy was an ex-cop. But I didn't know he was packing heat that day.

'Oh,' I said. 'Then it's a good thing you didn't go through the metal detector.'

So that's how I upped my production value. But it could be stressful at times.

**After *Heart Attack Theatre* you made a David Lynch-inspired piece of madness, the wonderfully titled *Twin Cheeks*. What's the story and tell us about the making of *Twin Cheeks*?**

I grew up in Seattle, and have lived there most of my life, including the time *Twin Peaks* first aired on network TV. But I never actually watched it at the time. Strange, huh? In the early '80s I had seen *Eraserhead* in the theatre and it freaked me out. And I saw *Blue Velvet* when it came out but I wasn't a hardcore Lynch fan back then. I first warmed up to his work when I saw *Wild At Heart*, that had a big influence on me. The over-the-top acting, and that scene where Diane Ladd smears lipstick all over her face. Just seeing how crazy you could make a movie. But what really won me over was the movie *Fire Walk With Me*. And even without knowing all about *Twin Peaks*, I totally got into the Laura Palmer story, and her double life, and the evil menace that was tormenting her. With just enough of a supernatural twist. I not only watched that movie over and over at the tail end of my *Heart Attack Theatre* days, but I listened to the soundtrack extensively while shooting *Twin Cheeks*. It was my soundtrack to 1993. And maybe not un-coincidentally, it was by the end of that year that my ex-lover died. Was my work from this time a reaction to that? I don't know. But I was certainly receptive to stories about death, destiny, tragedy, and release. And certainly letting go of self-imposed boundaries.

In *Twin Cheeks* I did a role reversal. Instead of it being about a dead homecoming queen, it was about a dead homecoming king and about his younger brother going undercover as a male stripper to infiltrate the sex and drug syndicate that exploited the homecoming king, leading to his tragic death. The fun part was playing with iconic *Twin Peaks* elements. For instance, I made one character look like Julee Cruise, you know, a retro '50s prom dress and blond wig. And I created a character called the Wood Woman, based on, of course, the Log Lady. Except my Wood Woman lashed out at people with her log, using it as a weapon. And for the evil Bob presence, that was represented by a troll doll.

We drove up near where the actual TV series had shot. So those scenes looked quite accurate in *Twin Cheeks*. But there were times when I was climbing down slimy moss-covered boulders to get to a river with an authentic *Twin Peaks*-esque backdrop and came very close to slipping and dropping my camera – my beloved Panasonic S-VHS camcorder. That would have shut down production immediately. And I still have nightmares of my camera smashing against big rocks. But all of us up there during the shoot felt that strange vibe. There really is something supernatural in the Pacific Northwest. Maybe it comes from the trees. Lynch captured it in *Twin Peaks* and we got his sloppy seconds.

**Your 1996 feature film *La Cage Aux Zombies* starred Russ Meyer's Ultra Vixen Kitten Natividad in a wonderfully wild scene in which drag-queen zombies drink milk from her breasts. How did you go about directing a scene like that and what was it like working with her?**

Kitten is a total peach to work with. And that scene where the zombie boys suck milk out of her tits was shot in the street right in front of her house in Hollywood. She lives just down the block from Paramount Studios and I was afraid her neighbours would object but they didn't bat an eyelash. I guess they've seen it all on that block. And besides the milk scene, there's also the part where she kills a guy with her breasts, and another scene where a zombie rolls her giant tits up in a car window, then starts driving, dragging her down the street. So working with Kitten is an adventure.

After I finished *La Cage*, I went back down to LA to promote it for a home video convention and I stayed with Kitten. One night we went out to dinner along with Llana Lloyd and the head of some big LA law firm. That famous Mexican restaurant on Beverly Boulevard, El Coyote Café. Kitten was dressed to kill. I mean, she wore this skimpy halter top jumpsuit with stretchy fabric, and a plunging neckline. It totally gripped her tits and ass, leaving nothing to the imagination. I mean it was like she had two bowling balls hidden under the fabric on her chest and every eye in the room was on her. It was like being with Marilyn Monroe at the height of her fame. You could feel the energy in the room. And the men just turned into animals. No subtlety whatsoever. Just slobbering ogling animals. Once we settled into our corner booth, I had to sit on the end to block men from approaching Kitten. And when the lawyer left, leaving a gap, I had to push men away who were trying to squeeze onto our seat. So I became the chaperone, and told everyone – Kitten included – that no one was gettin' nothin'. And that it was my duty to make sure Kitten made it home that night without getting molested, which I did. I also organized a photo shoot for Kitten with a local photographer and I videotaped it, and ended up making a documentary out of it called *Faster, Kitten Natividad! Kill! Kill!* I haven't been able to find a copy of it for over ten years now. But I do stay in touch with Kitten. And she has taken her rightful place as godmother to today's up and coming burlesque stars.

### **And Llana Lloyd also has a cameo, what was she like to work with?**

When I worked with Llana, we shot her scene in the hotel she was staying at near the University of Washington. And a TV crew from *Evening Magazine* was following us around for a segment they were putting together on us. So I have great memories of Llana's beautiful, girly pink hotel room, and the great lighting set-ups we appropriated from the TV crew. She recently had a 20 year anniversary DVD release of her movie *Glitter Goddess: Queen of the Sunset Strip*. So I did an interview with her last year for that. You can read it on my website. She's a real historian of LA's Glam Rock scene in the '70s. She has stories about everyone and she really needs to sit down and just write a big book about it.

### **Tell us about the book you are writing?**

I suppose the title says it all. *VIDEOTEUR: An Analog Account of a No Budget Media Mogul in the DIY '90s*. Beyond talking about the actual making of *Heart Attack Theatre*, and other creative projects, I think my book is really about the absurd things people do for recognition. And about the colourful people you meet along the way. I'm a firm believer that truth is stranger than fiction and that our biggest accomplishments are our experiences and memories. We're lucky if we can look back and smile at them, and smile at ourselves. Looking back, I'm most proud of my resourcefulness and my eye for unique talent. I hope that comes across in the book. And I hope that younger people who read it get a glimpse into what it was like to create projects in a pre-YouTube, pre-digital world. It's a bit of a time capsule.

### **Any plans to release *Heart Attack Theatre*, *La Cage Aux Zombies* and *Twin Cheeks* on DVD?**

I'm concentrating on the DVD release of my documentary *Heart Attack!* later this year. So no immediate plans for a DVD release of those other projects. I don't know, I kind of like the fact that they're still only available on VHS.

**Find out more and keep up to date with Kelly's projects at [www.kellywaynehughes.com](http://www.kellywaynehughes.com)**

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