

23 QUESTIONS

with

RYAN NICHOLSON

**President/CEO of
Flesh and Fantasy Inc.**



InSight Magazine: Tell us a little bit about yourself. Where were you born, when did you move to Vancouver, etc.

Ryan Nicholson: I'm an Alberta boy, born in Edmonton and raised there until 1981. My family picked up and moved to Atlanta, Georgia, so my Father, Dr. Roy Nicholson could attend Chiropractic College there. After about one year, the family moved again, this time to Portland, Oregon, where we lived until 1986. Once my Father graduated, he set up his practice in Victoria, BC, where I resided until 1995. For the last decade, I've been across Canada and back to Vancouver, working on movies and building up my own empire of sorts!

IM: Your bio talks about your dad facilitating your love of the horror genre. Do you owe him a debt?

RN: Well, my Father was into the horror and sci-fi stuff as a kid himself. He used to take me to all of the scary movies and the ones with wicked creatures and gore. I really, truly became obsessed by the genre and I guess when my obsession started eclipsing my school work and my grades went down the tubes, that's when his attitude shifted into 'Go to school, get good grades, this make-up effects thing is only a dream'. My parents ended up giving me the boot at age 17 because I was more interested in making rubber masks than studying math. That was probably the best thing that happened to me because I ended up getting a job at 24 Hour Video in Esquimalt and I watched horror movies day in, day out...and the odd porno!

IM: Most people in your position pick up a video or super8 camera to fulfill their desires in film. What made you turn to make up and prosthetics instead?

RN: I really was intrigued by the creatures and the gore. Plus in school, when I was there, I excelled in the arts. I always had access to clay and plaster of paris so I made do with what I had. I use to save up any allowance and buy liquid latex at Tony's Trick and Joke Shop as well as other make-up supplies. He was always great about carrying the theatrical make-up and other goodies, books and stuff. I always thought his Daughter Julie was cute too, so that gave me another reason to go into Tony's!

IM: Give us a quick rundown on your history in the movie industry.

RN: My first movies were student films at Barry Casson's film school in the early 90's. Then I did a little stint on Abducted II back in '94, I think. A fake arm for a drowning scene at Thetis Lake. I did another film called 'Making it Home.' I did a cool old



age make-up with an old friend, Damon Bishop, who has since become a famous artist back East. I started doing all sorts of short films, a really weird one called 'Slave World.' I remember they shot some of the gore in the basement of my video store at the time, Front Row Video in Fernwood, back in '94. It was a sick little movie! I loved it. After doing the video store thing in Fernwood for a couple of years, I got a chance to work in Montreal on a movie called 'Bleeders.' I went for it and ended up living there for a year, cutting my teeth on films under the brilliant guidance of Make-up Effects guru Adrien Morot.

The bloody weather was too cold and then too damned hot so I came back to Victoria for a bit, then decided to move to Vancouver. I've been back East a couple of times since, one to work on David Cronenberg's eXistenZ for 6 months and another to collect my Gemini Award for Best Make-up back in 2002. I was nominated on two other occasions for the same award. I was glad to finally win it for 'Andromeda.' I busted my butt making aliens and other things for nearly 4 years on that show. It was a warranted win.

IM: You've been doing Flesh and Fantasy for about a decade now. Tell us about some of your clients/shows/productions.

RN: Some highlights in my career have been meeting some great directors and actors. Some of whom have become close friends to me. I've done Jon Voight's prosthetics for three films and Jon's a personal friend. A great man who always brings the prosthetics to life. Working with Frank Oz and taking him out for dinner was a highlight for sure, he was so awesome and so down to earth, I keep in touch with him to this day. I flew down to Morgan Freeman's house just outside of Memphis. He has a huge plantation that is beautiful. I molded his head and other extremities for a movie that has yet to be released. That was a highlight. I would say flying first class on British Airways to Cape Town, South Africa for a Nokia Commercial was probably the most fun I've had on a gig. The weather and the scenery was amazing!

My Father and I even had time to take in a Great White Shark tour out near Seal Island. I saw a dorsal fin but that was about it. The skipper of the little boat we

were in tells us when we're out there floating that some of the sharks are bigger than the boat we were on! I felt a little on edge after that! I flew to Taipei, Taiwan for a Wrigley's chewing gum commercial a few months later. That was an experience. The director didn't speak a word of English!

Writing and directing my own Feature Film, 'Live Feed,' is probably the crème of my career to this day. An amazing experience that I doubt will ever be recreated.

IM: What was the hardest thing you've ever had to do in makeup/prosthetics?

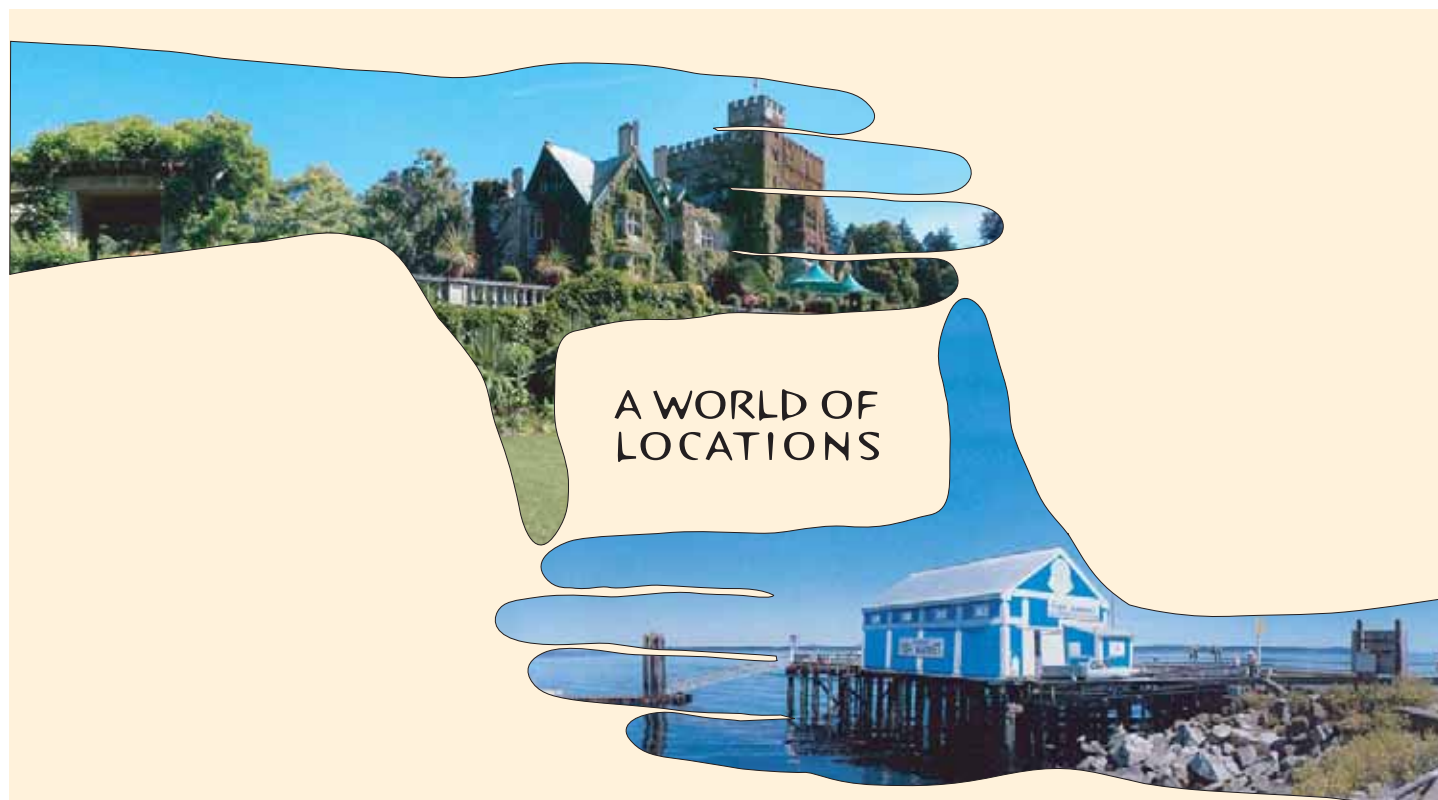
RN: The hardest thing I've ever had to do was the movie 'The Five People you Meet in Heaven'. It was just so many applications on Jon Voight and we had to make him look old, and then younger. It was the middle of summer and the gelatin pieces were problematic under those conditions. But overall, it was also very gratifying to do the final application on the last day of shooting. Man, we did applied that prosthetic make-up to Jon 55 times! Thank God it was him, any other actor would've been a pain in the ass!

IM: What was the most satisfying thing you ever done in makeup/prosthetics?

RN: The make-up effects in my movie 'Live Feed' was the most satisfying gig because I built the gags and I shot the gags. When you have the ability to light and shoot your own stuff, it's so gratifying.

IM: What's the weirdest request you've ever had from a production/film company? Did you do that work?

RN: We've had tons of strange requests over the years. Someone who won the lottery wanted to be in disguise... I smelled bullshit... he just wanted to rob a bank I think, so I passed on that job. Another fellow had sleep apnea or whatever that disorder is called, he wanted a silicone gasket made around his airmask so oxygen wouldn't leak, otherwise he could die in his sleep. I made a few gaskets but I started to think this guy was a bit of a nut as he started to bring in charts of his sleep patterns and it seemed like nothing I did would satisfy this guy, so I sent him packing. We made 350 silicone asses for the



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23 QUESTIONS with RYAN NICHOLSON

Boyscouts of America! Well, let me explain, they we're training kits, like how to dress a wound with gauze and ointment. It just so happened, the wound was a bedsore an inch up from the asscrack! The same company now has us working an inch below, making silicone assholes for a fecal extraction bag. Enough said!

IM: Tell us about the new make-up school you've started up with John Casablancas International.

RN: It was apparent a few years ago that Western Canada had no prosthetic effects classes that were on par with classes being offered in LA or Toronto for that matter. So I designed a 4 month Creature Effects Course that is in conjunction with John Casablancas Institute. Casablancas offered the closest thing to teaching make-up effects in a lab environment so I improved on that and we now offer it in a working prosthetics lab, the Flesh and Fantasy Inc. Studio.

My graduating students have already worked on genre movies, one gig was doing Michael Ironside's prosthetics for a feature film, they did a great job. My other students did the make-up for my movie 'Live Feed'. They did a wicked job! They have my seal of approval. The 'Mastery in Prosthetics' course runs year round and anyone interested can go to www.fleshandfantasy.com for more info. Best course around, I should know, I teach it!

IM: Do you do any of the teaching/instructing, or do you leave that to the "toby slaves?"

RN: I had a great make-up effects artist and close friend of mine, Jason Ward, a Victoria boy too!, substituting for me for 3 weeks while I shot 'Live Feed'. The students loved him and he'll be teaching more for me. Jay also was the prosthetic supervisor for 'Live Feed'. What a trooper, he'd teach in the day and come to our set at night. That's dedication! But other than that stint, I have and



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will be the main instructor. I enjoy teaching. I love to show things I have learned and it keeps me on my toes, keeps my skills sharp.

IM: How "hands on" are you still with *Flesh and Fantasy*? Do you still get to get your hands dirty, or are you mired in paperwork and keeping the business running.

RN: I'm more hands on now than I was 7 years ago when I had 25 employees in my studio. Back then I was neck deep in contracts and bidding on shows. I sculpted a few things but the business stuff was brutal, a big learning curve. As the years went by, I figured the best way to run the shop was to step away from the bids and business, let my Father handle those elements and get back into the plaster and clay. Now, I do almost everything in the lab. I keep a couple of people around but mostly it's me and the mice that scurry across the studio floor when the clock strikes midnight.

IM: Here's a segue for you. You've just started up your own film production company called "Plotdigger Films." Has this been a lifelong dream?

RN: Plotdigger Films is really where I'm at nowadays. *Flesh and Fantasy Inc.* is

it's own beast and after a decade, it's all grown up and needs less attention than Plotdigger Films, which we're currently pushing full force. To write and direct is my passion and really always has been. Make-up effects stopped being fun when my relationships with best friends and buddies I learned with and hung out with started to go sideways over money issues and credit issues, etc. I've lost some good friends in this business. Artists are so God-damned temperamental!

IM: Will writing, producing and directing movies get in the way of your makeup work? How do you think it will affect *Flesh and Fantasy's* business?

RN: I'm way more interested in writing and directing than doing make-up effects for other people's movies who don't give a shit about you or how hard you worked to build them. The only time someone comments on the effects is when something goes wrong. They never tell you 'You did a great job, thanks' I'd rather do my own movies, I can pat myself on the back and tell me what I need to hear. 'Live Feed' didn't interfere with *Flesh and Fantasy* jobs, it actually created a gig by my movie being so effects heavy.





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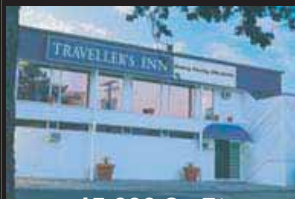
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23 QUESTIONS with RYAN NICHOLSON

IM: Tell us about the first productions from Plotdigger Films.

RN: The first production for Plotdigger Films was actually a co-production with my dear friends at Creepy Six Films. It was a 45 minute long movie called 'Torched'. It was a rape-revenge story with some great gore and some penis torture. I wrote the original script and we were going to shoot it at a hospital ward in Victoria but had to scale back when the costs got past \$4,000.00. So Vince D'Amato from Creepy Six re-wrote the picture and we shot it in seedy downtown Vancouver. It truly is a nasty little picture. It will be available on an anthology called 'Hell Hath No Fury' this fall I think. Go to www.creepsixfilms.com for more details.

IM: Are you having fun with this aspect of the industry, or do you find it's just "more work?"

RN: I love making my own movies. I'll do it until I'm six feet under and even then I'll make a movie in the afterlife!

IM: Would you describe Plotdigger Films as a "low budget horror factory?"

RN: Plotdigger Films isn't a 'low budget horror factory.' I would consider Troma Films to be that. I'm getting stunts and special effects that are worth hundreds of thousands of dollars. Now, these industry professionals are giving me a break because they like the scripts and the projects. 'Live Feed' looks like a seven figure movie. Besides, I have scripts that are dramatic, not horror. Some of my favorite movies are dramas. I don't want to be so single-minded to just do one genre. I have a dramatic tv series that I'm developing right now. It's a bit like 'The Shield' meets 'The Sopranos' meets 'Nip/Tuck'. It's called 'Halfway'. Look for the pilot soon.

IM: Describe your ambitions in relation to Plotdigger and how will Flesh and Fantasy fit in with these?

RN: Plotdigger Films is going to make at least 2 movies a year. We want to become a fully in house production studio with all of our own equipment, staff, etc... The only way to do something is to do it yourself.

IM: Local Victoria low budget horrormeister Brian Clement says that the most important things in low-budget films is "organization," and "imagination," coupled with the ability and desire to do it yourself if needs be. Do you agree with this, and what's your take on low budget films?

RN: Yeah, I'm a fan of Brian's movies and he's right. When you are doing things yourself, you need to be extremely well organized because you don't have the luxury of a big Hollywood budget. You have to stay on schedule. Any mistakes are costly, especially if you're renting gear and pulling in favours. You need to think on your feet. You always have to be shooting, no matter what happens. The power goes out? Get a flashlight and keep shooting!

IM: Are you aware of Clement's films? What do you think of them?

RN: I saw 'Meat Market' a few years back and thought it was fucking well done! I like the fact that he showed a cock in it. It was something you don't see in low-budget horror too often, usually it's all women getting naked but Brian had a bonerfide penis in his movie. I laughed my ass off!

IM: What are your goals for the future?

RN: Make Plotdigger Films into something worldwide. I'd love to be able to shoot movies in other countries. But that takes some dough and it'll be a few movies from now until we are on location shooting in South Africa or Hong Kong.

IM: Compare living in Vancouver to living in Victoria.

RN: I'd rather live in Victoria. I find it more refreshing. I love the vibe. In Vancouver, it's always go go go, whereas in Vic, it's mellow.

IM: What would you say to aspiring young people who want to get into the movie/TV industry, no matter what aspect they are shooting for?

RN: Anyone with a mini-dv camera can make a feature film nowadays. My advice to anyone wanting to get into the industry as a technician would be to volunteer on any independent film no matter what the genre and no matter department. Wardrobe, lighting, sound, make-up, camera, etc... Help out and learn, learn how to help out. Network and you'll find you'll be hopping from one set to another. Don't expect to get rich fast. It's a long hard road and not one to be on if you're into it for the money. But if you have a passion for the celluloid, as Nike said, Just Do It! Or was that Reebok? Hmmm.