



Julian Richards
Writer and Director

THE LAST HORROR MOVIE

Q - Back when you were a kid in Wales, what is it that made you want to make a film?

Julian - It was three experiences I had. First of all, my father had a Super 8 camera and we used to go on an annual holiday abroad. He used to film the holiday, send the film off to Kodak to be developed and they would come back a week later. It was like Christmas to unwrap the parcel and put the Super 8 film through the projector. Just the magic of seeing that, our life caught on film, was captivating. Then seeing him edit it, putting the Super 8 through an editing machine, cutting all the boring bits out, made me realise that I could actually have a crack at making a film myself with my school friends. Also I was a real horror maniac and I used to kick my parents out of the living room on Saturday evenings - usually because they would fall asleep and snore - so that I could watch the horror double bills on BBC2. So I combined that with the accessibility of Super 8 and made my first horror film when I was 13.

Also, I had an uncle, who in 1958, went to America to become a Hollywood star. He used to play for the Welsh rugby team and his nickname was Tarzan because he was one of the most athletic men on the field. He heard that they were auditioning for a re-make of Tarzan in Florida, so he went out there to audition, got short-listed, but eventually he didn't get the part. Another film was casting at the time called *The Wild Women of Wongo*, and they basically employed all the Tarzan rejects to play the men of Wongo! My uncle, Rex Richards, ended up playing King Wongo, and I grew up with this object of admiration of a guy from Wales who had gone to Hollywood and was living the American dream - albeit in one of the worst films ever made!

Q - How much do you think that crystallised in your mind the desire to be a success at an early age?

Julian - In working class, provincial Wales, we are more taken by the American dream than by anything else. And so, my desire to be a film maker was as much to do with my love of the American dream, as it was to do with my love and understanding of cinema. I think my perspectives have changed now.

Q - What do you think you get from film school in the best possible sense?

Julian - Well the great thing about film school is that you get put into a building with like-minded people, the same age as you. You get given all the equipment, and you can just go ahead and make your films with the guidance of the teachers. The courses that I did at Bournemouth were not really academic - they were very practical. It gave me the opportunity to work on a level that was much more professional than I had been doing with my Super 8 films. It was a step towards me being recognised by the industry as a professional, worthy of employing or financing. I think that in the long term, however, the fact that there wasn't an academic side to the process meant that, well, what's the use of a film maker who doesn't have anything interesting to say? At the end of the day, there is no easy answer, and there are many ways of achieving success, but I think the more weapons you have at your disposal, which includes having an academic as well as practical grasp of film making, the better.

Q - How did your first feature film come about.

Julian - The first feature film was 'Darklands' and it is something that I had written way back in Bournemouth Film School in 1987. I'd been kind of tinkering with the script on and off right through to 1994 and I sent it out to a lot of companies who all wrote back and said 'We are not interested!' At this stage I had established myself as a film maker to watch with my short film *Queen Sacrifice*, which won several awards. The problem was that people were a little bit confused by the fact that I had built up this reputation as the kind of director who would tackle a social realistic comedy drama like *The Full Monty*, but now I was presenting a horror movie at a time when horror movies were not in vogue. Things changed when the government introduced lottery finance, and there was lottery money available in Wales. I think my application for production finance to the lottery was the only one that came in that year, so there was little competition. I got £250k out of the lottery and matched that with private investment from Metrodome. Metrodome had established themselves as a producer of commercial British genre films with Paul Brooks as a veritable Roger Corman, who would take undiscovered talent and give them their first chance in feature films. So we made the film for £500k. I had written it with a bigger budget in mind, somewhere between £1.5m - \$2.5m. So it was about making compromises work.

Q - What did you learn making 'Darklands'?

Julian - At film school I was in control of the shorts I made. I was in control of the casting. I was in control of the budget and the schedule. With 'Darklands', it was the first time I handed over control of the film to a producer. I found myself being forced to make compromises with casting, budget and schedule, which inevitably had a derogatory effect on the film. I also learnt that you really have to be careful about the crew you choose to work with because every film has its own constitution in terms of who the decision makers are and how those decisions get made. I learnt that it is important to go into a film as a director who has some influence on the production side of things and make sure that you are not turned into a Rumpelstiltskin character, being asked to weave gold out of straw. I also learnt about the importance of script development. 'Darklands' did go through a period of development, but in retrospect, I think it would have been a better film had I got another writer involved, which would have allowed me to become more objective to the material as a director. I also learnt how brutal the industry is. In the past I had ignored the whole business side of the process in terms of contracts and representation. I had to learn that very quickly in order to protect myself. I think going into the industry as an innocent, there are a lot of things you have to learn to protect yourself as you will work with people, particularly in the horror genre, who just don't have the same quality threshold as you have, or don't have the same moral and business ethics as you have.

Q - Were there any big shocks that hit you like a freight train during sales and distribution?

Julian - With 'Darklands', no, because I effectively gave away the project as soon as I started to direct it. I simply became the director and I wasn't really involved in any other aspect.

Q - Surely you made shit loads of money out of it?

Julian - Out of 'Darklands'? No! I didn't make a penny - in fact I lost money. It was an extremely ambitious film for a £500k budget and, as I said, it was an exercise in making compromise work. During the shoot there were a couple of scenes that had been so terribly rushed that I wanted to re-shoot them, but the producers didn't have the money. So I funded the re-shoot myself without actually owning any of the film. I wasn't going to make anything out of it other than make sure that my reputation as a director wasn't jeopardised. So I went out, guerilla-style and re-shot several scenes at a cost of about £3k. Luckily, the actors were willing to come back for free and the producer turned a blind eye. In the end everybody was very pleased that I did it. That was the frightening aspect, if I hadn't have been willing to do that, the film would have been presented to the market and I don't think it would have been anywhere near as successful as it was.

Q - So all you got out of it was a directing credit, on something that at best you knew was as good as it could be based on the circumstances?



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Julian - I agreed a fee of £20k with another £60k deferred, and I knew that I would never see the £60k. A week before shooting, the production had cash flow problems, and I was asked whether I would defer the other £20k, but the word deferral wasn't used - instead they called it a 'hold-back' which was presented to me as 'a corridor at the back end' - a sort of guaranteed deferral. So, thinking I was helping everybody involved in making the film, I naively agreed - but eventually, I was only paid £2k, which was £1k less than what I spent on the re-shoots!

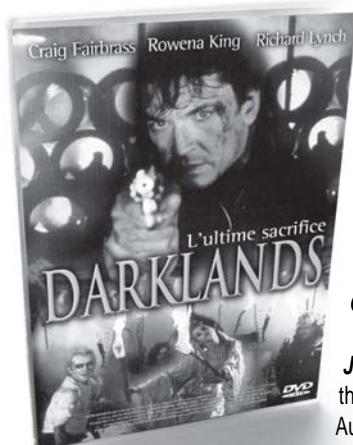
Q - How did the next film, 'Silent Cry' come about?

Julian - I didn't work for 5 years after that, partly because of the compromises that I was forced to make on 'Darklands'. My agent at the time said had the film been 5% better, he could have got me my next feature gig, but despite my efforts to deal with all the curve balls thrown at me, my first feature film had fallen short. Meanwhile, I was developing a number of scripts with writers and one of those scripts was put on a script website. This was during the first year that the section 48 tax break funding became available and there was a company called Little Wing Films that found a way to use that to fund a whole slate of feature films. But these films had to be made immediately and completed by the end of the business year and they had got cold feet with one of their projects because it required extensive special effects work and therefore a protracted period of post production. So they shelved it and looked for a replacement project. They were actually fishing around on websites to try and find screenplays that were in an advanced state of development so that they could go into production within five weeks!

To get this into perspective, five weeks before shooting I was in the dole office, not the normal dole office, but the dole office you get sent to when you have been unemployed for several years and you feel like you are at the end of the line. I was in some horrible building in Neasden, surrounded by people that looked like they had just got out of jail. That's when I got the call... 'We've got £3m to invest in your film, but would you be ready to start shooting in five weeks?' I seized it with every ounce of energy that I had left, and gave it my best shot.

Q - What did you learn on 'Silent Cry'?

Julian - The benefit of working with a team of people who are extremely professional, who have a high quality threshold and are there to support the director in everything that he wants to do. Well almost. It was the first bonded film that I had done, and therefore I didn't get a full choice of crew. Some of the crew members were imposed on me by the producers. I found that when those kind of decisions are made, they are made because they want to play safe, and sometimes playing safe is not the best way to make a good film. Sometimes you have to take risks, and I tend to be more of a risk taker. But you also have to give and take. Directing a film is not a totalitarian affair and the producer has as much right to contribute. 'Silent Cry' is something that I was employed to direct. I could have quite easily been removed at any stage, and somebody else could have been brought in to complete it. I also learnt that the people behind the financing side were incredibly savvy accountants, who could maximise the tax possibilities, and gave a lot of new film makers a break.



Q - How did the film perform around the world?

Julian - When In-Motion Pictures presented the film at Cannes, they did a fantastic job with the posters and the marketing, but they were selling it as a TV film. They sold it to Australia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Scandinavia, Germany and it was screened on Channel 5 here in the UK. Unfortunately, In-Motion Pictures are now in the process of being taken over by another company, so 'Silent Cry' is stuck in a state of limbo and I'm not sure who controls the rights, which of course is frustrating.

Q - Has it come out on DVD in the UK yet?

Julian - Not yet (2005). There are all kinds of theories as to why, but we don't really know. I don't think it has anything to do with the quality of the film. It is out on DVD in Germany, Scandinavia and Australia. There is now a trend in distribution where sales agents are going straight to TV. They are getting all the exposure and publicity from TV, then they will put it out on DVD. Also if cash flow is

what you are interested in, the theatrical / DVD distributors are going to pay you a tiny minimum guarantee compared to the full buy out fees that a TV station might pay. In Germany, stations pay \$120k for the TV rights, whereas a DVD distributor will probably give you, if you are lucky, \$20k for the DVD rights. So there is an argument to sell it straight to TV. It is a better option if the film doesn't have the kind of theatrical potential that is required. To be honest, most European films, most non-Hollywood films, do not have the theatrical potential that is required.

Q - How much money did you make out of sales and distribution on 'Silent Cry'?

Julian - Again because I was a director for hire, I didn't make anything from sales and distribution because I don't own the film. But I got paid a handsome salary to direct it. It was that salary that I used to fund *'The Last Horror Movie'*.

Q - So I guess the lesson here is, no matter how you get your picture made, don't assume you are going to get any money out of the back end, so try and get paid up front?

Julian - Absolutely. You are only ever going to see money out of the front end of any deal. When a sales agent and a producer sell the film to the distributor, they get the MG - minimum guarantee. It may as well be the maximum guarantee! When the film is distributed, it goes through various other sub-distributors that take their share. The amount that trickles back to the distributor, and then trickles through the sales agent and back to the producer is negligible. It is easily consumed by P&A expenses. However, you could make the back end work. For instance, if I was directing a low budget film and there wasn't enough to pay me a decent salary, I would say *'That's fine, I'll accept the salary that you are offering, but I want Germany, and I will sell it to Germany myself.'* I have relationships now with several German distributors, and three of my films have been distributed in Germany successfully. I am confident that I am at least going to get a minimum guarantee from Germany, which would amount to what I would normally expect to be paid.

Q - So as each film utilised a bigger budget than the last, why did you choose to make a movie on a camcorder next?

Julian - Two reasons. I became frustrated with the film making process. The production designer on *'Darklands'* described it as being *'rail-roaded'*. You stick the director on a set of rail tracks and you keep them on there throughout the whole process. I couldn't take risks or do anything that they thought might undermine the project. Let's bring in the old guys with experience, like the DP, the editor, people who have a proven track record, so they can make the big decisions. You feel like you are on some sort of production line. It happened on *'Darklands'*. It happened on *'Silent Cry'*. I knew that I was better than that. I still hadn't been given the opportunity to show what I could do. I realised that the only way that I was going to do that would be to put my money where my mouth was and do something where I made all the decisions. At the same time, it had been a long term ambition to make a low budget independent horror movie inspired by *'The Texas Chainsaw Massacre'*, *'Night of the Living Dead'* and *'Evil Dead'*. I attempted to come up with ideas and scripts in the past that were derivatives of those films, and shoot them on 16mm. I still needed a good £200k to do it justice, and I could never raise that amount of money. Then digital film making came along, which allowed me to do it for £50k. I had £50k, my fee from *'Silent Cry'*, and what I considered to be a brilliant idea, so the timing was right.

I realised as a director that knowledge is power and you only really have the knowledge if you become a producer and understand what happens with the money. If you control the money side of things, it has an influence. You are therefore controlling the creative side as well because nobody can tell you, *'Oh we can't do this, because of this'*. You can turn round and say *'Well, actually we can!'* At the end of the day, that is what makes a good film - if the director is given enough space, enough room to do his thing. That is exactly what I did with *'The Last Horror Movie'*.

Q - What is the concept of 'The Last Horror Movie'?



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Julian - The film is a video diary of a serial killer, but the serial killer has made the film to choose his next victim, and he does that by recording the film on top of an existing horror film, called *'The Last Horror Movie'*. The idea is that the next person who rents that film after the killer has returned it to the video store, gets followed by the killer, and becomes his next victim. So YOU, the unsuspecting viewer, think that you are going to watch one film, and five minutes in you discover somebody, the serial killer, has taped over it. He was there when you rented the film, followed you home, and you are the next victim. The idea was really born out of my desire to do something different with the horror genre and push the boundaries. It was an attack on the teen slashers of the 90s, and in many ways it deconstructs the genre. Ultimately, it is confronting the audience on a number of levels about why it is the audience likes to watch a horror film. As a horror film maker I always get asked *'Why do you make horror films?'*; and this is an attempt to answer that question. Also I think that people like to watch horror films because they know that what they are watching is second hand, it is safe, it is fiction. Some of the most powerful horror films push the envelope on realism. So you've got Orson Welles' radio broadcast of *'War of the Worlds'*, *'The Texas Chainsaw Massacre'* which was presented as a reconstruction of true-life events, *'The Blair Witch Project'*, which presented itself as real footage that had been found and edited together. I wanted to take that a step further. The best way that I could think of doing it was to not only suggest to the audience that what they were watching was real, but they were also now going to be directly threatened by the character within the film. They are no longer safe within the sanctuary of their living room watching the TV screen and thinking that they are watching fiction. The guy could be outside. I thought that is possibly as far as the genre, or at least that aspect of realism in horror could be pushed, apart from hiring somebody to actually kill a viewer! (laughs)

Q - How did you find working with a smaller crew, and what were the disadvantages when shooting it?

Julian - I think this type of film making has all the same values as the Free Cinema movement, the French New Wave, and the American New Wave where the Studio System self destructed and the film students and critics came out with their hand held cameras and started to produce fiction. Not within a studio, not on a set, but on the street. With digital it's the same, except you have even greater freedom because you can use available light. Suddenly, you don't need gaffers and grips, lights and generators. You can literally work with a documentary-sized crew, and that cuts down time and expense. What were the negatives? Very few, apart from the fact that with digital (DVcam / miniDV etc.) you do tend to have to shoot everything quite close. You can just about get away with mid-shots, but wide-shots tend to pixelate. You just don't have the definition. Also it works very well in dark interiors and available light situations. But when you are outside during daytime, especially if it is a bright, cloudless day, it can be a real problem trying to get a good image. I think that the ideal with digital, which Michael Mann did with *Collateral*, is that you take available lighting into account when you write the script and choose locations.

Q - What did you learn shooting it, making it?

Julian - Because we were shooting it as if it were a documentary, it was often shot in real time. I wasn't using my usual approach of breaking a scene up into shots and creating this jigsaw puzzle that would often be shot out of order and then reconstructed in the editing room. Instead, we were shooting every scene in one long developing shot. Everything happened in real time, and that completely changed the whole emphasis of the process. Whereas before the actor would be reduced to being, as Alfred Hitchcock used to say, *'cattle you could push around on the set'* suddenly they became everything. Forget the actor hitting their spot. Forget the fact that the camera is out of focus. What matters is the performance. A film is only as good as its worst performance. We had some fantastic performances in *'The Last Horror Movie'*. We had a great idea, a great script and a great cast. None of the actors were stars, but they had talent. It proved to me that there is a lot of undiscovered talent out there. The question is how will I take what I have learnt from this type of garage film making and apply it to a more conventional way of making a film, where I have to break a scene up into 25 shots and create a jigsaw puzzle where nobody really knows what is going on except the director. I'm in favour of tilting the balance of power on the set, as much as possible towards the actor, which lends itself towards a realist school of film making. You can't apply that to every type of film, but it was a valuable lesson to learn how to get good performances.

Q - Did you have any budgetary concerns, did you stay on budget?



Julian - The budget started at £30k but went up to £50k by the time we had finished shooting. Mainly because the producer persuaded me that I needed more production value in the wedding scenes and also the murders, if the film was going to stand a chance of competing in the market place. *The Last Horror Movie* was designed to go straight to DVD and we only really needed to deliver a Digibeta, but I knew that the festival circuit was an important way of platforming the film, and that meant we needed a 35mm print. So we had to spend another £15k to get it up to 35mm. Then I realised there are so many festivals out there that one print isn't enough, so I spent another £1.5k on another print. With all the marketing, publicity and festival expenses, the project came in at £85k.

Q - So how was the film received by the market?

Julian - The first territory to go for it, and they went for it with gusto, was the US. The ideal scenario would have been to get the film into Sundance or Toronto, as those are the key festivals for this kind of film. I knew that if I broke America, then the rest of the world would follow. America sneezes and the rest of the world catches a cold, that was my plan! I knew that the distributor that I wanted was Lion's Gate, but they didn't respond and I didn't get into Toronto or Sundance because the festival programmers thought that *TLHM* was too similar to *Man Bites Dog*, which was disappointing. Then Fangoria put in a small offer, which was attractive as the theatrical costs were not crossed with DVD, so as far as the accounting is concerned, there is no way of eating up future DVD profits through theatrical expenses. Once America had gone for it, Tartan picked it up in the UK. We went on the festival circuit and played 50 festivals, and we won 14 awards, and slowly but surely all the smaller territories bought it.

Q - If you were to advise a new film maker about their contract with a sales agent, what are the clauses that you would say "Try and get this in"?

Julian - Sales agents will want to put themselves in first position to recoup their expenses. So however you funded your film, whoever you have got in first position, suddenly the sales agent checks in and says they are in first position. Chances are, even if it is remotely successful, the minimum guarantee payments will barely cover the sales agent's expense. So the sales agent is cash flowing its company on the revenue from your film. This might be acceptable of a film where everybody has been paid a union rate, but it's not acceptable for guerilla films when cast and crew have worked for free. When selling deferred payment films, I think the sales agent has got to bear in mind that it is just unviable to put themselves in 1st position. The best deal that you can strike is to just say, 'Look, let's do *Pari Passu*', where the sales agent takes 10% of what he sells the film for, against his expenses, and 15%-25% commission of everything. When you strike a deal like that, you don't need to put a cap on expenses because the sales agent should continue to sell the film, and every sale that they make, they are going to be spending money doing it, so they may as well repeat that 10%.

Q - It is in their interest to sell as much as possible?

Julian - Yes. I've also heard it advised that you have a performance clause in the contract where if they don't achieve those sales figures by a certain time, then you get the rights back. The other key thing is deliverables (all items needed by the sales agent to sell the film, also called the Delivery List). Sales agents have a generic list of deliverables that they will slap on the table and say 'OK, this is what we want from you, and if you don't deliver, you breach your contract'. At the end of the day, most of the deliverables are unnecessary. If you are delivering straight to video, you need the basics. The distributor or sales agent may ask for the 5.1 sound mix broken down onto DA88, which is great for *Harry Potter*, but this isn't the same. I could have spent another £10k on providing the sales agent with all the deliverables on the generic delivery list, but I knew they would not be needed, and only if they were requested by the distributor, would I spend the money to make them available. That is one way of saving money. The other thing is that the sales agent will often employ a delivery company to deliver



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to the distributors. The delivery company will charge the distributor a mark up fee, so why doesn't the producer do it instead? At least you would be getting some revenue back that is not going via the sales agent. However, the problem with this is that you have to be available to do the deliveries when it is required. Then you become a delivery company and not a producer. You have got to be aware of that.

Q - This is the age-old dilemma - you could control the sales yourself, but at what cost?

Julian - The real cost is what you become. You become a delivery company, a sales agent, a lawyer looking at contracts, and an accountant. Two, three or four years could pass by very quickly and you have no time to sit down and write your next script or develop your next project. So there is a price to pay. I suppose you have got to start somewhere, and the ideal thing is next time round, you will employ people or get interns to cover those things. The only way to learn is by doing it yourself. The one good thing I would say about me doing all this recently is I now understand the business of film more than I ever did. I'm not talking about making films, I'm talking about selling them, distributing them, exhibiting them, and how that reflects on the type of film, as a producer, you should be making. The problem with a lot of films is that they are made by people who have no understanding of that side of the business, and therefore they are hoping that it is going to find its place in the market. Whereas if you have the experience that I've had, and you can say 'I know what distributor is going to buy this, I know what audience is going to come and watch it, which festivals it is going to play well at...' You can look at an incoming project as a producer and say 'Yes, this is going to work.'



Q - Because digital is so cost effective, so transportable, why not get on a plane and shoot your movie in downtown Milwaukee, making it an American movie? How would that have affected sales and distribution?

Julian - Our US distributor described 'Darklands', which was shot in Wales and cast with Welsh actors, as a foreign, art house film. Jo Blo in Milwaukee can't understand regional UK accents and even the Queens English can irritate. The only films that a mainstream US audience want to see are American films with American actors in them.

Q - How do you keep going from one project to the next?



Julian - That is the problem with being a film maker. Once you have finished your film, you are back where you started, and you have got to somehow pick yourself up and find the motivation to make the next one. It consumes a vast amount of your time. So I think yes, go out and do it, but make sure that the film is going to reward you in some way. More than just 'I've made a feature film', that is not enough. I've made a feature film that has got international distribution that has recouped the money that I've put into it. For that you need a good idea and a good script. That could be the easiest part because it is just you, your computer and your brain. That doesn't cost you anything.



Q - Given that film making is an antisocial and obsessive behaviour, what impact does that have on your reality in terms of interfacing with normal people?!

Julian - Ask my ex-wives! It is difficult, but I don't think it is as extreme as going to war, and coming back as one of those freaked out Vietnam vets. But when a film maker is not making a film, it becomes difficult to live a normal life. You are used to the adrenaline rush of getting out of bed in the morning with a real tangible purpose. It is very difficult to get out of bed in the morning when all you've got to grasp hold of is 'pie in the sky' and you know the gargantuan effort it is going to take to make it reality. One of the great things about making a film, is the opportunities it gives you. I've spent the last two years traveling all over the world attending film festivals and premieres. I have been to about twenty-five different countries with 'The Last Horror Movie' - some of those places I'd never been to before. The festival circuit is a great perk of the job, without which, film making might be a thankless task.



Q - What were your biggest mistakes in terms of career?

Julian - I wouldn't describe it as a mistake, but I tend to do things the way I want to do it. I find it very hard to be anything other than brutally honest. I can't pretend. I can't tow the line and compromise when I know that there is a better way of doing things. I think that has possibly created the wrong impression of me being 'difficult'. The reality is that it is not about me, it is not about my ego, it is about the film. I'm not interested in being a film maker. I'm interested in making good films. You could say that making 'Darklands' with all the compromises involved, knocked my career back five years. You could say that that was a mistake. But without making 'Darklands', I wouldn't have had the showreel or experience to get 'Silent Cry', and without 'Silent Cry', I wouldn't have had the money to make 'The Last Horror Movie'.



Q - What advice would you offer a new film maker?

Julian - Forget film. Embrace the digital medium with everything that you have got. Prove how good you are using that medium and regard it as the waste product of the process. Because at the end of the day, if you come out with something that is exceptional like Chris Nolan did with 'Following', it will launch you into another stratosphere. The problem is, new filmmakers are still hankering after 35mm film, and it is just increasingly a more difficult goal to achieve. It is affordable to make your own feature film in your bedroom now, and make it as good as anything Hollywood is doing. So why not just do it? It really is as simple as that.