

RUBBER PENCIL DEVIL

KARMA, NEW YORK, 2019.

ALEX DA CORTE IN PHILADELPHIA, PA SPEAKING WITH KEVIN WILLIAMSON IN LOS ANGELES, CA VIA TELEPHONE

Friday March 1st, 2019 at 17:00 EST / 14:00 PST

Alex Da Corte: What's your favorite scary movie?

Kevin Williamson: *Halloween*.

AD: [laughs] I concur. I grew up in the suburbs, in Haddonfield New Jersey.

KW: Wow.

AD: *Halloween* was a fascination for me from a young age. We would play this game where my tallest oldest cousin would dress up like Michael and hide in one of the homes in the neighborhood and all the parents would agree to leave their doors unlocked and go to bed early and probably drink some wine in their bedrooms while we would play this game where we would try to survive by not being found by Michael Myers — a reverse manhunt.

KW: Sounds fun.

AD: But completely terrifying. *Halloween* was interesting because it implicated the viewer to be the bad guy by putting the viewer in the perspective of the killer and for *Scream* it implicated that the danger was beyond the camera's lens by saying 'the movies made me do it.' It was an arrival at a strategy that John Carpenter had used, but you made it contemporary. So as a young person in the '90s, how did you know that that complicity should be done, or could be done, by making a film that was so self-aware?

KW: I don't feel like I came up with anything, I just spoke to it. I think it was something in the universe, the zeitgeist, it was all sort of floating around us and I got very very lucky that I wrote a horror film script that actually spoke to it. I think back to that moment that happened in the mid- to late-'90s when I got to be sort of in the front of that in the horror circles, that I wrote the first script like that. This was something I knew I was going to do my whole life from an early age, and I just consumed horror films and thrillers because I loved the adrenaline rush of the scare. I wanted to write a horror movie that I would want to see, that was written for someone like me, because I knew all of the rules. I knew as one character showed up that they were going to die soon. In *Halloween* the two girls who were sexualized, or were having sex, died, and Jamie Lee Curtis survived the night because she was the A student, she was the one with all the books in her hands. It was a big deal knowing those rules and that they existed in every other horror film too. It was the perfect, beautiful coming-of-age story, a young girl who had done everything right and she still had to deal with this one night of horror, and you know she has the courage to survive it.

AD: Who were you looking at, what movies were you liking at that moment?

KW: Every movie. I grew up in the age of the VCR. Before that the home video rental didn't exist. I grew up in the age where you could watch a movie ten times. Home video allowed us to know movies better than anyone had ever been able to before.

AD: It occurs to me now that *Scream* is a portrait of these "fourth sex" consumerist teenagers. It is so indebted to Blockbuster video and the VCR, and the weaponizing of popular culture.

KW: It was an era where we could consume everything. After the Reagan years, which were such an indulgent time, that indulgence led us to consume. We as a people were consumers of movies, which led to new technologies. What I love about *Scream* is that we were able to utilize the cell phone. Back when that movie was written not a lot of teenagers had cell phones. It was such a unique thing at the time and such a fresh way of showing teenagers communicating through the phone.

AD: And that was a driving force for the plot — its rarity. There was a line like "what are you doing with a cell phone, why do you *even have* a cell phone?!?"

KW: Yeah you watch it now and she calls 911 on her computer. On the internet. No one would have thought to do that, and now you watch it and laugh.

AD: For my generation, *Scream* is firmly part of the queer canon and celebrated as such in terms of its camp, its saturated quasi-cartoonish cinematography and its distinctive self-aware dialogue, but also the relationship between Billy and Stu.

KW: Well it's that Leopold and Loeb ending.

AD: Like Tom Kalin and Hilton Als' script for *Swoon* or Gregg Araki's *The Living End*.

KW: I was always fascinated by the Leopold and Loeb murder case. I was writing half of the movie and the killer was one hundred percent Billy, but then I realized one person couldn't have done this. It had to have been two. When I stumbled upon that conceit, the entire movie took another shape. At first, the only killer was Billy, but what bugged me was that one person could not have pulled off the first kill. A lot of people skip over that if you are just watching a horror movie, horror movies rarely stick to reality, but I thought the smart watchers are going to pick up on that right away.

AD: Yeah.

KW: No one did, but I thought I'm going to have to have an answer for that later.

AD: Because you introduce this creeper guy in the next scene, you immediately introduce the bad guy.

KW: Which is structure 101. I wanted to point the finger directly at him.

AD: Yes.

KW: And then I wanted to dismiss him because he gets arrested and the one phone call came when he was arrested so he couldn't have done it. But then of course you start to suspect him again, and then I kill him. It was one of those tricks where I went *look over here, don't look over there*, and the whole thing becomes about Matt [Stu]. I designed it that way, in a similar way that John Carpenter designed his shots where he would do suggestive tracking and use the foreground as the distractor. The use of foregrounds was so beautiful because he shot on anamorphic and he would have the whole left side of the screen open and you knew someone would step forward into it and they never did. It created that displacement, an unease.

AD: Yes, I think that that kind of shadow of a doubt which was so successfully employed in *Scream* and so many thrillers before it has faded away and the horror genre has had to adapt new ways to thrill or create unease. There is a new kind of compression today.

KW: Compression, yes. We are in a different place in horror today than we were before. John Carpenter did what he did so well and there were a lot of imitators that came after it, like *Friday the 13th*, all of these slasher films that came after *Halloween* and they were fun but they were a different type of thrill. And then we had the splatter films like Eli Roth's *HOSTEL* which were really shocking and also scary, and I think *Hostel 2* for example had a lot of mood and suspense in it in addition to gore, and then we go into the ghost movies like *The Ring* and *The Grudge*.

AD: *The Others*.

KW: I thought that was a lovely film. And then came the docu-horrors, like *Blair Witch* and the *Paranormal Activity* series.

AD: I remember a cool tactic in the *Paranormal Activity* trailers that showed sequences from the movie, but when the film eventually happened parts of the trailer were left out. The way that they created anticipation or shock was that they left out something you had already seen because of the trailer. They knew there would be information present that you had seen and it was this very new, meta way of creating suspense that I think is partially, you know, your fault, because you had created this really specific really meta way of looking inward and being hyper knowledgeable about the system that the characters were operating in. Movie makers have had to anticipate in real time that people would navigate films and horror in a different way in an age where there is information glut and we can all have access to everything.

KW: That's great.

AD: There is this really great series of artworks by Douglas Gordon, it's this British guy and he has a wig on, a blonde wig and it's called *Self Portrait as Kurt Cobain*, as *Andy Warhol*, as *Myra Hindley*, as *Marilyn Monroe*. I would add Drew Barrymore from *Scream* if I were to ever remake this work. This led me to think how the image of Drew has developed into this specific icon, like Warhol and Marilyn Monroe. Can you speak to how the image developed as a screenwriter? I had your screenplay on my bedroom desk in the '90s, it was a book you could buy from the mall, and I have

read it many many times and the words are synonymous with the characters in the film. I cannot remove the image from the words, but for you, for a time, there was no image. There was no Ghostface mask, no blonde wig or white sweater.

KW: Well I do picture it, but it is never exactly what you picture it to be, because it's a communal effort, it takes a village to make a film. And I think if you're reading the script you are reading the mask more like a *Halloween* Michael Myers mask which is kind of faceless. And then we stumbled upon that mask accidentally at a location scout and it was in someone's garage, and Wes really liked it. At the time it was just a dime store mask.

AD: I had that mask! I remember my freshman year in high school in '94, I bought that Fun World mask. There were two kinds, there was a comedy mask which was like a fatter Ghostface smiling and then there was the tragedy mask that would become the Ghostface mask, and they were white and plastic and glowed in the dark at night. I remember being so excited because I didn't have to go out again and buy the mask for *Halloween* once *Scream* came out. I had it in my basement.

KW: [laughs] You had one of the originals! Well the couple that owned that design, it was really good for them. It put them on the map and it was really nice that they were able to benefit from it.

AD: I love that, the strange path of objects. I just saw on the news recently that a man in Jamaica won the lottery for 158 million dollars and he received his oversized check while wearing the Ghostface mask so he could protect his identity.

KW: [laughs] Yes I saw that, everyone I know sent that to me on Twitter.

AD: There is a long history of films in which telephones are the main antagonists and I guess you could lump parts of *Halloween* into this history, there is of course Fassbinder's *The Bitter Tears of Petra van Kant*, Mario Bava's *Black Sabbath* which features a segment "The Telephone", *When a Stranger Calls*, *Scream* and more recently *Black Mirror*, but I kind of wonder, given the time that you wrote it, why the telephone was considered to be the main antagonist and again if that related to a general attitude towards the new technology arriving. If you saw this weird alien form of energy, the cellphone, coming into the culture like the monolith in *2001*.

KW: I never really saw it that way — it was much simpler than that. I always wanted them to be outside of the house. For me it was more matter of necessity for the storyline. I wanted to use divisive technology and I wanted there to be a phone call between the killer and the victim. It was inspired by *When a Stranger Calls* which I believe is actually the movie she has in her hands in that opening scene.

AD: Oh my god really.

KW: I could be wrong, but it was in one of the takes. She might have had the other one too, *The Children of The Corn*. We did a couple of takes. I wanted to do that really long Janet Leigh scene and we always said we wanted to get the biggest star for the opening scene. We wanted that conversation on the phone that was slightly

too long so you really think she is going to survive.

AD: I was in high school in detention in the art room and everyone was talking about *Scream*, the new Drew Barrymore movie. When I finally saw it in the theaters it was real, it was real horror, my expectations were shattered. It changed my brain forever.

KW: It really put the weight on Neve Campbell, the very next actress you saw in the film. It took a really long time to find the right actress to cast for that role because she had to carry the weight of the whole movie on her shoulders and we were also worried there might be some disappointment like *oh god Drew's dead, no one is going to watch the rest of the movie*.

AD: There is so much risk there, it's real auteur film making.

KW: It felt that way when we were making it too, we felt like we were making something cool. We were all kind of young and Wes was like *ugh one more horror movie and then this one came along* and he was like *oh this is different, I like this*. You can just tell he had fun and we all had fun making it. It was a magical experience and I'm happy that it shows.

AD: It forever shows. I think about it all of the time.

KW: Neve, we loved her. She kept it centered and grounded, she was just so human in the film and she kept it so grounded in reality too. She plays grief so well. She had been doing *Party of Five* about dead parents and then she plays a girl that lost her mother. She was just truly solid.

AD: She is one of the many strong female leads that you have written for and I wonder whether you had a cool mom or cool sisters or female role models in your life. You write roles for women in such an awesome way.

KW: Well, for me, growing up gay, in a small town, I was always struggling with identity I believed I had to be masculine and couldn't show any sensitivity or soft side of myself or any attraction to men because you would be considered feminine or a girl. I always thought I was straddling a fence when I was hiding my sexuality, so when I finally could let it out it just kept coming out in so many different ways and in so many different characters. A lot of times when I was writing *Dawson's Creek* a lot of people would be like *oh all of your characters sound like pop psychologists* and I would say *OK well go back and read the script with a southern accent and tell me if that's still the same*. A good Southern drawl changes everything.

AD: That's a thing I love about your work, that you often talk about your home and that the place you grew up was really formative for you, and despite the fact that you live in LA you have a clear sense of the manners by which a marginalized queer person in the south, or just how a person who understands family in that kind of setting, has to navigate the world. Your characters embody that, which is really beautiful.

KW: Yes, I think my partner Julie — who I met on the set of *Scream* when she was Wes Craven's assistant and I now work with constantly — she told me I only write about family and grief. She was like let's go through it, and in every project I had ever done it was front and center. She told me it's obvious, that I'm not even subtle about it. It becomes so subconscious after a while.

AD: I guess it's just who you are and you write what you know. To write honestly or to make honestly is the only way.

KW: And by the way, when I don't, to my detriment, it shows.

AD: Did you ever watch *Clue*? Were you a fan of that when you were young?

KW: *Clue* the movie? I loved it — with Madeline Kahn, of course. [laughs]

AD: I love *Clue*, I just love it. It's another film that could be considered camp, it's beloved by queer people, it's beloved by everybody, and there is a kind of horror and a kind of comedy folded into it. I found out that the novelization of the movie was written by this screenwriter Michael McDowell who wrote a series of cool pulp homoerotic thrillers in the '80s under the name Nathan Aldyne.

KW: Oh really.

AD: He eventually wrote the screenplay for *Beetlejuice* and *The Nightmare before Christmas* for Tim Burton. You speaking about the formal conceit of the killer outside the house brings me to McDowell and his depictions of views from the periphery. This is what McDowell's characters like Beetlejuice and Jack Skellington did, and it beautifully anticipated *Scream*'s queering of the domestic and the pathology of the outsider coming in, whether through destruction or assimilation. I see it in a '90s line with films like *Swoon*, *The Living End*, *Safe*, *Funny Games* and *Elephant*.

KW: In *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, there is nothing more horrific than watching that husband and wife just rip each other apart — they do it with words but they also just completely stab each other to death and kill the two guests they invite over for drinks. It's a slaughterhouse, and it's all done with words and its gorgeous.

AD: Do you ever fear replicating yourself or repeating yourself?

KW: I have been involved in some great projects and some real shitty projects. There is always a reason why something can go south, but that's the excitement of doing something. As long as I'm proud of it and in this day and age as long as I had a really good time doing it that's enough. Working with a group of people on a day-to-day basis and having a really great time creating something is more valuable than the results at my age.

AD: Collaboration is everything, like you say it takes a village to put on these things, and it's so much more about the community than the singular.

KW: Well you have to enjoy your life, I mean my work is my life to a degree and if I can't tap-dance through my day then it is a bad day. This desire to prove something to others, that kind of went away, it's mostly for me about proving something to myself and just trying to do a good job and hoping that that kind of freedom will allow me to be more creative and take more chances and not get lost in the system, not get lost in the Hollywood machine.

AD: What kind of questions do you ask yourself? How do you push against that as a maker where you arrive at your desk and you have been doing this and have had success and you go OK I'm really going to bring it and bring it again and bring the truest heat I can bring because I'm just digging deep inside of myself.

KW: Well you know, I never think of it as I'm going to bring it, you know, but I try to write honestly, try to go with something that really really really takes you somewhere. If I can find something that really really moves me, I can probably find a way to make it really move you too. Everyone always talks about that night, that moment with horror movies, and everyone talks about *Scream* and says it was really cool, it was scary, it was fun. When I look at it, all I did was sit down and write a story about a young girl who had lost her mom and she just couldn't navigate her world and didn't know how to trust anybody and she was lost. That's what I take out of it, and everything else came around after that. That was such a background plot for so many people who watched the movie but that is why I wrote it. I was writing about grief, the entire movie revolves around that. She was beginning to doubt that she had framed the wrong person for her mother's death and that's where her mistrust developed. She started not trusting herself, her boyfriend, it threw her into a second-guessing situation where nothing was right anymore and her world got turned upside down. And she started getting terrorized by a killer.

AD: Totally. Fear eats the soul. I had read somewhere that when you were writing this you were thinking about an open window, and I always think about the *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* episode called "An Unlocked Window" where there's this nurse caretaking for an elderly guy and she hears on the radio that someone escaped from the jail and she's just thinking, over and over in her head, *did I leave this window unlocked*, and thinking how fear or that doubt that you were just speaking about, it can develop into its own monster, that open space of the unlocked window or the open space of Carpenter's anamorphic tracking shots.

KW: Well that had actually happened to me. I was watching Danny Rolling's *Primetime 20/20* type show and I thought that was such a creepy serial killer in Florida who killed all those people.

AD: The Gainesville Ripper.

KW: I was housesitting for my friend. There was an open window in the house and I had been there for two nights and I was like *how long has that window been open, did I not close that, does he always leave that window open*, suddenly I had noticed it for the first time. Of course I ended up calling my friend and I walked through the house with a knife checking behind every door while he was on the phone laughing at me.

Published by Karma Books, New York
Edition of 500