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Our Fears Are All the Same

The director of "Halloween" -- and former Western student -- chats about his folks, his reputation . . . and scaring people for a living.

John Carpenter is beat. The acclaimed horror movie director rubs his eyes blearily as he sits down to a cup of coffee in the University Plaza Hotel lobby. It's last Saturday afternoon, around 2 p.m., and three days of juggling jet lag, a screenplay and catching up with friends is trying to catch up with him. Hard.

Carpenter is winning right now. The filmmaker - perhaps best known for his modern horror classic "Halloween" -- lights a Winston and takes a sip of joe. It's an hour before the 51-year-old has to make a presentation at the Southern Kentucky Festival of Books, but he's making time to chat.

For being an internationally-known screenwriter, composer, producer and director, Carpenter is surprisingly low-key. "I don't consider myself as a celebrity," he says, chuckling. "I don't have the personality, nor the looks to be one." He shirks off questions about his talents, preferring to brag about his colleagues. He loves talking about his parents. There's no ego-tripping here.

It's probably his Kentucky upbringing. In 1953, his family moved from Carthage, N.Y., and settled in Bowling Green. His father, Howard, got a job teaching music at Western. The Carpenters lived in the small wooden house on Kentucky Street, right behind Rodes-Harlin Hall. The house is still there.

In 1968, Carpenter left Bowling Green to attend film school at the University of Southern California. Ten years later, he made America scream bloody murder with "Halloween." Since then, Carpenter has made more than 15 films, including "Escape From New York," "Big Trouble in Little China" and "Christine." He's got a rabid fan following that'd make Anne Rice jealous.

And here he is, taking a drag off a Winston in the Plaza Hotel lobby. Carpenter has a whisper of a handshake. His silver hair barely brushes the back collar of his black and grey sweater. When he smiles, it's an explosion of wrinkles and crinkles around his eyes. Carpenter's genuine. He says "man" a lot.

During the 30-minute interview, he smokes three cigarettes and has two cups of coffee. No one rushes the table and asks for an autograph, just the way Carpenter likes it.

"Nobody knows who I am here," he says, smiling. "I love the anonymity."

Herald: What frightens you?

Carpenter: Everybody's afraid of the same things. Every person on the planet is born afraid. Fear is the strongest emotion that we have. The thing about horror films is we all have the same fears - disfigurement, loss of a loved one, pain, the list goes on and on. It's so common to mankind. It's a genre that is basic, universal. People understand it in China, in Thailand, everywhere. Why? Because we're all basically the same. I'm afraid of the same things you are.
A kid learns about the world around him when you're growing up. I learned everything that I put in my movies right here, [taps the table] in Bowling Green.

**How much influence did your parents have on you?**

I got everything from them. The greatest gift I ever had was my parents; when I was very young they always told me, "Don't just sit around and look at stuff. Create something of your own. Write music, anything. Just do something."

My dad gave me the gift of music. Everything I know about music, I got from him. He taught me the violin. But more than that, I absorbed his love - and understanding - of music. My mom gave me the gift of loving music and fantasy. My mom's a big movie buff. She was the one that brought me into that realm.

**Although you've blended other genres like Westerns and Sci-fi into your work, you're still a horror director. Why stick with it for all these years?**

I got typecast after "Halloween." Hollywood looks for you to fill in a niche they're comfortable with. Because I was successful at it, that's the niche I was in. At first, I struggled a little with it. Earlier on, I had done an action film: "Assault on Precinct 13." I thought, "I don't want to get stuck here." But after a while, I realized this was my chance to be "John Carpenter." This was my chance to actually have a signature. So I thought, "What's wrong with that?" [Laughs]

Really, my films are all about "What is evil all about?" What does it mean? What does it look like? How do people - characters - respond to it? Sometimes it's out there [Points to his chest] Sometimes, it's in the human heart. It's an endless subject to explore. It's one that could go on forever; exploring its different shapes and forms. The subject matter fits really well.

**With all the years working in the same genre, have you ever experienced "horror movie burnout?"**

There's been various times when that's happened. One coincided with when there were some personal changes in my life. I took some time off from the business to get away from it. I mean, you have to do that. I stopped last year and took a year off because I just couldn't do it anymore. It wasn't horror; it was movies. I was sick of the process.

There was a period of time in the late '80s where I was thinking, "I can't do this anymore." So I took some time off, and things were better. There have to be "refresher" times like that.

**We're sitting here shooting the breeze. You're an average guy. But your fans perceive you as a celebrity; a god in the horror movie business. Do you see it that way?**

[Frowns, shakes his head] No. I mean, there's a deal about celebrities and Hollywood. Hollywood is a dream factory, man. Out of Hollywood comes the things that inspire us that scare us. Since we were kids, these things influence us. The people who see the guy who made the movie they love say, "Oh my God!" They are a clear projection of all our dreams and good feelings we had when we saw their movie.
But you really wouldn't want to know us as human beings out there. We're neither the best nor the worst people out there; we're just people. A lot of us have problems - that's probably why we create. I mean, actors are narcissists. That's why they do what they do. And that can be very painful. They suffer rejections all the time. They're not the people who they play - at all. But we all project our own fantasies onto them. If a celebrity walked in here right now, people would say, "Oh! Lookit! Lookit! Lookit!"

It's interesting. Actors act and directors direct. The audience does the rest.

**You get to scare people for a living - what a great job. When you write and direct horror movies, do you tap into a part of the brain where the scary things lurk?**

Yeah. Yeah, I do.

**Can you describe the process?**

Like with anything you create, you do go through a process. I use a tip James Cameron gave me once. Write at night. No one will bother you then. You don't have to pay attention to anybody; they're all asleep. There are no phone calls. You don't have to "give out." You can be selfish.

But you have to get into what you're writing. For me, it's going into the horror and the heart of darkness. I never ask myself when I'm writing, "What would scare me?" or "What would scare my audience?" I just write what scares everybody. Our fears are all the same. They're universal.

And it depends what your subject's all about. The movie "Invasion of the Body Snatchers" is about the loss of humanity. That's a pretty scary subject, and the movie focuses on that kind of fear. "Halloween" is about losing your life. Asking yourself the question, "Can I survive the night?" You tap into a different creative process for both of those. It all depends on the story.

Stephen King's the master of the horror novel. Bernie Wrightson is the master of horror comic book art. What's your reaction when people say you're the master of the horror film? [Shakes his head] I'm just a director, man. I just do my job. I don't really think about that stuff. I mean, I know a lot of horror directors; we're all friends. I don't think I'm "The Master." I think David Cronnenberg is the best director out there. His movies are great.

**Did you have any idea you'd be this successful, this renowned of a filmmaker? Even in your dreams?**

Every kid wants to do something. When I was 8 years old, I knew I wanted to be a movie director. There came a point in my life - in 1968 - when I had to make a decision about college and the future. My parents were kind enough - and had enough money - to send me to USC. I learned movie-making. I learned enough about the craft and the technical aspects of it there, and I just went for it. It's just like anything else: It takes time, and you have to be lucky and work your way in.

But you don't think about being successful as much as you think about just working in this industry. That's all I really care about. I don't really care about the details. I could do small films, big films - I just want to do this for a living. That's all I've ever cared about.
Vital Stats

**Name:** John Carpenter

**Born:** Jan. 16, 1948 in Carthage, N.Y.

**Base of Operations:** Los Angeles

**Career Highlights:** Most folks know Carpenter by his 1978 thriller "Halloween." Over the last 20 years, Carpenter has become a successful writer, composer and director, proving himself with "The Fog" (1980); "Big Trouble in Little China" (1986); "Prince of Darkness" (1987) and others. He has directed 19 major motion pictures. He appears in some of his own movies under the name "Rip Haight."

**Is there truth to the rumors about Bowling Green references in "Halloween?"** You bet. "Both 'Halloween' and 'The Fog' had big references to people and places and towns and streets in town," he says. "It was fun to do, I put in streets, high school teachers, classmates, old girlfriends, all that stuff."