

Transcript

'The Night Frankenstein Was Born': An interview with Stephen Volk, writer of Gothic (1986)

Stephen Volk

You know the log line in a way is that the night Frankenstein was born.

Selina Packard

Well, I guess we can start at the beginning talking about Gothic. So, the source of it all is obviously Mary Shelley's Frankenstein. So, what was your first encounter with Frankenstein?

Stephen Volk

Well, I guess I'll go way back to when I used to spend my pocket money by going down to a local newsagent and buying comics, buying Marvel comics and that kind of thing. I mean, most days in the I guess the mid to late 60s days started to publish Marvel Classics. That's when I first, I guess read things like Doctor Jekyll and Mr Hyde or the Greek myths, or Moby Dick or White Fang or Frankenstein in in kind of comic book form.

That's probably the first I came across it, although you know you go up with these stories, I think before you actually know the stories themselves, you know, you have observed the culture of the Frankenstein monster.

For instance, I remember saying to my uncle once. Well, you know what does it look like the Frankenstein monster? Oh, he's about 10 foot tall and he's green and he's got a bolt through the neck, so you gotta pick up on these things. Before you know the story and then I picked up from my grandmother the fact that my uncle, he went to see Frankenstein when he was little, with my grandmother, who was his mum, and she said to the ticket lady 'oh he'll be alright', he won't be scared of this, and anyway, as soon as he saw the monster coming on the screen, he was under the seat for the whole rest of the thing, so that probably was my first encounter with the Frankenstein myth.

And I probably didn't read it until I was in my teens and I mean the original as opposed to the film versions and the other versions you think you know, and it was a big shock, of course, to come across the description in Mary Shelley's book of the creature, which has since been supplanted by the many, many film versions, and Christopher Frayling is brilliant in his books about that evolution.

You know I think that I've become fascinated by his books that look into how, you know, the book was one version, then it became another version, Shelly had his input in his wife's book and then it was only really a big success once it was staged. That was the extraordinary thing, it's when it was done on the stage performed, then it became a massive hit and then people discovered the book, which I thought was extraordinary and of course what he is pointed out as we being really interesting, once you stage it, once you dramatise it, certain things have changed from the story.

For instance, Frankenstein has to have an assistant. So from the very first days it began the stage show. There was a lab assistant, you know, Fritz, I think it was in the original one, and Fritz in many other films and also the other thing is whereas the way he constructs life in the book is very vague. It's a kind of alchemical mystery that's kind of off screen once you dramatise it on stage, it becomes a big kind of laboratory scene. Which obviously, all the films, the laboratory scene, where the creature comes to life is the pivotal scene, the very thing you know so it was really interesting.

This is more recently reading the evolution of the form through culture. How you know different aspects come out in different media.

Selina Packard

So when what was your first encounter with that historical material?

Stephen Volk

Well, I think again I probably picked it up. In little dribs and drabs, obviously singing, bride of Frankenstein, there's the little vignette at the beginning with Lord Byron and Mary Shelley very demurely discussing what they're going to write. You know it, and it, and it modernises very kind of weird and kind of cliché in a way.

You know, once you know James Whale had a very acerbic and kind of camp sense of humour, it starts to make a bit more sense. But anyway, maybe the inspiration for me was leading David Day's book, a heritage of horror, which I read, I think in the I'm not sure exactly when it came out, but according to my kind of history of writing Gothic, it might have been the mid 70s Things, and I remember reading the first couple of chapters.

I mean, David's book, I should point out, there's a kind of rehabilitation of hammer films, because they've always been seen by film critics as kind of low rent, you know, well, German in particular in British cinema has been seen as low rent or, you know, throughout the history, really.

But David, kind of rehabilitated the idea that hammer films were an extension of Gothic literature and that was the thesis of his book, really. But the first couple of chapters were really about the, what I call the kind of birth of modern horror, which was this kind of haunted summer of 1816, where Mary Godwin and Shelley swan off to Europe, because Mary's half-sister Claire Clairmont wants to hook up with Lord Byron, who she's infatuated with, and he's not infatuated with her.

So, you have them kind of fleeing to Europe to the shores of Lake Geneva, to Lord Byron's house, Villa Diodati. Where he's ensconced with his menagerie of animals and Doctor Polidori who has a very weird kind of like victim predator relationship with a bit of an S&M relationship with as I proceeded.

What I perceived when reading the first couple of chapters of David's book was this extraordinary place with these extraordinary people. For one summer, and possibly even one particular night. I mean, that may be a fabrication on my part, but there was a date where Mary said '*I woke, we discussed and shared ghost stories, we had a ghost story competition*', which I think Byron suggested, and we all said we were going to write a ghost story and I kind of woke from a nightmare and had this idea for a ghost story and it became Frankenstein.

And it was the most extraordinary kind of idea of, a candescent idea. You know catalysts from an idea going off in Mary's mind, in this 19-year-old girl in 1816 that I thought, wow, you know, this is the moment that modern horror and science fiction was born.

And I thought why has nobody told the story of what happened in that house. At that stage I didn't know that other people had actually written screenplays around the same time as me, so it was weirdly kind of swimming around at the same time, a couple of other people had the notion that that there was something in this, and I thought, well, if no one's gonna write it. You know, I thought it was a not only was it something that I found interesting, but the other side of my mind was this is a low budget British film.

The British characters of it, that you can actually, it was kind of doable as they say, it was all set in one house. You know the whole thing happens in one house and it was a dramatic piece. You know that's how I saw it really from the outset.

Selina Packard

I was wondering, after David Pirrie's book did you then go and explore other sources?

Stephen Volk

That was the starting point for I read what biographies I could get a hold of on Diaries and that kind of thing, to be honest, I couldn't, I could, you know, we're talking about over 30 years ago, I couldn't give you a list now of the exact ones, but I remember reading *The Romantic Agony*, which was about Gothic literature and then it became clear to me that what I was talking about doing or I had a feeling my way to doing was casting these real people as Gothic archetypes.

That seemed to fit what I was doing because I think what I was aiming for really, is if this is the birth of horror, then then the thing itself had to be a horror story if you see what I mean, so even though it's a real story, it really happened, but it has to have the form of a horror story, and if it's a form of a Gothic Horror Story. Then it has to have the Gothic characters and I thought, well, they're handing me the gothic characters.

In a way, there's the sinister nobleman with the secrets. There's the kind of mad scientist. There's the kind of crazy woman. And then there's the kind of virgin, if you like, about not a virgin, but the kind of virgin character who go to the big house and is, you know, predated upon by the nobleman, the fatal woman.

That was the phrase that Mario perhaps uses in *The Romantic Agony*. So the fatal woman. Would be Claire and so on and so forth. So I was using that as a filter to kind of hone in on the roles as I was kind of inventing them. The difficulty after a while, of course. As you say, I use certain lines.

Remember the line about where Laura Barron says, she's come a certain number of 1000 miles to unphilosophise me or he says, you know, the the Swiss are the, you know, in the most beautiful country in the world, but they're terrible kind of. Better words than that, obviously, because he's Lord Byron, but I loved using those words to give a context to the kind of people they were, you know, and I of course, the thing that stands out that people always, it's kind of WTF moment for people that don't know that they always talk about the breast with eyes.

Where the hell did you get the idea of the breast with eyes, and I said well, because that's exactly what Jenny said happened. But he hallucinated for us with eyes.

So that's going to go in the film and you know, so I think people think are the most outrageous kind of Ken Russell kind of excesses are actually things that are, that were there and reported you know.

Selina Packard

Yeah, thinking about Ken Russell and moving on to the production and I'd like to ask a couple of questions about your experience of the production of the film. First of all, just how involved were you at the writing level and then at during the shoot.

Stephen Volk

My agent and I sold the script. It was a spec script that I wrote, completely kind of uninvolved with other people, but she managed to sell it to Virgin Films, and Richard Branson's new set up and the head of production Al Clark met up with me and another co-producer Robert Fox, and we had chats about revisions to the script and once I'd done those, it was like, OK, we'll get back to you when we've got a director.

And it was, I think, almost literally, two years then, I thought every day I thought, am I going to get the phone call saying they found the director?

Nowadays, I'm so kind of jaundice that I think you know what? I'm never going to hear from them again. But in those days I thought, well, they're gonna phone me one day.

But anyway, one day. They did phone me. I was working in advertising at that point, and I was sitting at my desk sitting with my art director, we sat opposite each other. I got a phone call from our clerk and this was about 1984-5, I think and Al Clark said 'We found a director, it's Ken Russell'.

So there's a bit of a shock for me to hear the words, Ken Russell. And I ended the phone call and I said to my art director, if you had written a script, who would you least want to direct it. And he said Michael Winner, and I said I said second guess and he said Ken Russell.

So I only tell that story because A) it's funny and B) because it shows that at that time, you know Ken had gone off to America, he did *Altered States* which is very well regarded now that he's also done crimes of passion which isn't so well regarded, but I didn't know how to feel about this.

In one respect. I didn't know what Kenny's reputation was now, I didn't know how I'd be able to work with him if he was a crazy man and I also have a supremely kind of in awe and excited because *The Devils* is my favourite film of all time and I thought, Oh my God, it's kind of like how often would

someone not only get to write a film that goes into production, but be directed by the person who's directed one of your favourite films of all time?

That's happened to me twice. Once William Friedkin, who did the Exorcist as well. So I've had that moment twice, which has been weird in both cases. But I didn't really know how to you know you have to just bite the bullet and get on with it and Ken was always I mean, to his credit, he was always wonderfully positive and quite a teddy bear, really. I mean, people would expect me to have around the stories that he was on unfun to read or some other French phrase, but in fact, he was just wanted to get the film done because he's at home when the cameras running and that's where he does his kind of, that's where he does his writing. And his rewriting and his thinking is when the camera where he's looking through the camera. You know and I think you get that from his films really.

But the great thing from the script's point of view was that he wanted to make it, he read it, he liked it, he wanted to make it. And this, I probably found out in, say, September, and he said right we should make in May next year, and they were alright, nowadays you'd have at least 18 months kind of script development which would drive you crazy.

But because they have the director and he said, No, I want to do it and we'll do it then, he kind of kept in the chase in a wonderful way. So we did do more work on the script and suddenly, the next draft of the script I did, I kind of over Ken Russelled it, and he said no take all that stuff out. That's too much like I've done already.

So I kind of cut all the bits that I thought he'd like and it kind of went back to how it was, but his input in the script, maybe I'm going off the points slightly here was his main edit on the script was I had a kind of bookends to the story. At the beginning I had Mary Shelley on her deathbed and fading away and recalling the story of what happened at Villa Diodati so and then going back to her at the end, when the creature that she's created actually visits her on in the moments of death.

And I quite like that as kind of but it put the whole story in parenthesis as her kind of fantasy or misremembering which are quite likely because it gave me leeway to be creative. And basically I think that Ken thought, well, we don't need that because it's not her fantasy, this is Ken Russell's fantasy, you know, so he didn't feel it was necessary to do that that.

It's a shame because I think it would have been lovely with Natasha Richardson and it would have been lovely to have the Vanessa playing an older version, for her mum playing for us and, you know, especially as themselves they had connections with Ken and everything like that. So that would have been lovely. Then he didn't want to do that but that was the main, the main thrust of what he wanted to change. And he wanted something at the beginning, to show these poets had fans, just like rock stars.

And I thought, oh do we need to show them as rock stars and you've done that before, but he loves to show them as rock stars, you know? So he put a little bit of that in. That was about all really.

But I did visit the set and it was very welcome and everything and it was a very formative moment for me, going to the set for the first time and seeing all these actors, these wonderful actors that I kind of knew by reputation, and I kind of had met. In a kind of read-through but not didn't know well.

And they were sitting there in costume around a big, long table for a dining room scene and there's like 100 people in certain, you're looking at this thing, and I literally thought the last time I saw this, it was inside my head, you know?

So that's a very peculiar and gratifying feeling, in fact, I think writers that work for the screen are kind of the reason we put up with such bull and hard work and craziness is for little moments like that where you actually see something externalised and in a weird way that's what the film is about.

Seeing the effect of what's inside their heads made manifest, and I think the only critic, the only critic in the way that really got off on that idea of all people, was how the medicine, the science fiction

writer. Who was diffusive in his affection for the film. And you know said that it embodies the kind of creative, the burning Crucible of creativity.

Selina Packard

So it sounds like you were happy with the casting or just maybe the the experience of seeing those actors embodying the roles was just quite overwhelming. But I do wonder how far did that casting sort of chime with your idea of the original character?

Stephen Volk

Yeah a lot of names come up when you're in the room and you're thinking about casting. One thing that Virgin Films said is we don't really know who should play Lord Byron, but not Rupert Everett.

So I didn't delve into that but I knew they just made another country. So we veered off that. I had in my mind the idea that Shelley and Mary could be Emma Thompson and Kenneth Branagh. I don't know why I thought that, but I mean probably kind of silly to think now. But you have to think back to like 1980.

To think that that might work and funnily enough, obviously later on, Kenneth Branagh did his Frankenstein, in which he played Frankenstein. Even though in that film, he looked a bit more like Noel Edmunds at that at that time, but the other thing, they did offer it to Daniel Day Lewis, Lord Byron. And he turned it down. Not only did he turn it down, but he actually wanted us to know that he hated it.

I mean, I say only, but he'd only done my beautiful laundrette. It wasn't like he was... you know.

Anyway, it's entirely his that, I just thought it was pompous him saying, you know, I want these people to know how much I hate it. Well I thought well fair enough.

Ken was very keen, actually Polidori was very good looking, young man, very Italian. Italian made good looking man. But with all due respect to Tim Spall, he wasn't cast as a kind of heartthrob. He was cast, Ken said he was cast as a grotesque really, Ken was worried that the other actors were too beautiful and he wanted someone a little more over the top in the mix. And he'd seen him, I think it was a TV play called Dutch Girls, where he was at a school that played a schoolboy that got very drunk, I think, and a visit to Amsterdam. Anyway. It was a crazy thing that, that, Ken, that took a liking to. So Tim did it, but he didn't completely understand the film.

I remember sitting on the steps of Rockham Hall I think it was called, the house where they shot in in north London and he said I don't really get what kind of film this is, and I said it's just, think of it as a hammer film. And he said OK, I get that. But when we're went into a Film Festival, he made this wonderful remark to the audience. Which was? He said well, someone's got to get their head shaved and the Ken Russell film, and then this one is me.

My favourite scene, which is where the painting comes to life and the little imp is squatting on Natasha Richardson's chest where the Fusilly painting comes to life. The nightmare, that wasn't in the script at all. I in my naivety thought that the painting alone in the presence of the painting would be enough to infuse the film with a sense of menace and nightmare and surrealism. But Ken wanted to really go for it and go into it. So he dramatised that and I think the word went out 'get me dwarfs, lots of dwarfs. Told it so they did.

Selina Packard

I mean it is it is very much of its time, in a way, even though it's obviously set in the early 19th century and do you think there was any link between, because obviously the characters even though you were coming at it from a genre point of view, the Shellies, Byron, Claire even, they all had their own political point. They were quite political people, politically engaged and the 1980s was a very politically engaged time. Do you feel there's anything political about the film?

Stephen Volk

Well, I was very aware that these were quite well-off people indulging themselves in a country or state, you know, and even though you know, I've got unending admiration for what Shelly wrote, as a radical, you know that he's a massive hero of mine. He's a massive hero, kind of as a socialist of mine. But also I, remember reading in the diary where he says ohw e're really down on our apples at the moment, we're down to our last three servants, yeah. There was something going on in my mind about the idea of these very entitled aristocrats. On holiday, really indulging in writing and not having real jobs, you know and being able to indulge their idleness with these feats of the imagination. And he kind of he lind of made me think that you know, they're kind of idle rich in those days were the only people that that could write it, you know? Then we're able to have the time to write. And it's rather sad that we're going back to that kind of time, really. Where, people are not given a proper professional wage for writing and it's almost like I could see in the next few years, tragically, that writing could be something that can only be done by people independently wealthy. You know who are the people that get in the film industry are people that can afford to live in London because they've got rich parents, for instance.

It's horrible to think that that we're going back to the circumstances that enabled writing in the early 19th century. You know we haven't. really evolved in professional career path you know, which is of course why the job WGA, the right is going to America is on strike at the moment because it's just unfair, it's an unfair kind of playing field, you know and writing as a profession is kind of threatened.

I remember someone once saying that ghost stories, let's say this is a ghost story. Are either Freudian or Marxist. But there's the the role of the masters and servants is quite interesting. You know, a couple of scenes where the servants kind of look at the ceiling and kind of roll their eyes about what, what the aristocrats are up to, kind of thing. And this isn't only very shortly after Waterloo, which is only not that long after the French Revolution, you know, so it's I think maybe there's a there's a kind of subtext in it about what aristocrats get up to, and also, what does the idle mind, get up to, but it shouldn't.

That it shouldn't do you know? And I think there's an aspect of that which is related to the famous image of Goya, which is the man crushed on his desk with the big owl over it. You know, the sleep of reason begets monsters, I think it's called.

These things were much closer to the front of my brain than they are at the moment, but that was one of the images that was kind of like almost on my desk about this film. Because it is about the sleep, the sleep of reason. When you let the unconscious come up, so it's definitely Freudian, but I think there is a Marxist edge to that story, which is about servants and masters rather than a political discourse or political polemic. It's just there in the tone of the piece I think if anything.

Selina Packard

I'm wondering if your feelings have changed about the film over the years. If you've watched it at any point over the years and whether your view of it has changed in any way, and if so, how?

Stephen Volk

Yes, I think it just bear in mind it as my first film that was made. I didn't really know what to expect of the process and I didn't really know what to expect of the process of it being released. And shown to the public, you know and that combined with the kind of, not my ambivalence about Ken Russell, but the world's ambivalence about Ken Russell, part of me thought oh, this is going to get slated because it first of all, because it's the Ken Russell film when people get their knives out, or you know, being optimistic is this the film where Ken Russell comes back from America and makes a film, you know that reestablishes the British tradition of Cinema, fantastic, you know which is well known in France. Where we start to reawaken the idea of imaginative cinema in England alongside Hellraiser and Company of Wolves, which were happening at the same time, is this film going to be part of that movement to inject a bit of surreal madness into British cinema so I kind of had wishful fulfilment and fear at the same time that I didn't know which where it was going to go and I was basically met with kind of bemusement, and critics have difficulty liking it. because I think, they didn't really understand that it was a horror film.

They thought and were expecting more of a merchant ivory film about romantic poets. So when it is over the top, they think. Oh, this is Ken Russell going over the top again, because they didn't use the right reference point you know in in my thinking, but of course that's not their fault, it's just the preconception that they went with really, and I and as a result I didn't really know what to make of it. I mean, you often don't because you hand over a film to a director and the director makes the director's film, so your own authorship of it becomes fluid, or sometimes kind of questionable, you know. So I had difficulty kind of living with what I thought of it for a long time I mean, I thought I liked a lot aspects of it, and I tried to stop myself being critical of the things I didn't like because it just someone advised me it never does any good to go over a film and you know, self-publish yourself over what was right and what was wrong. Just move on to the next thing and that was very good advice. But I found after a while and I'm talking about after 10-20 years that I could kind of forget everything that went with my expectation of it and just watch it as a film. And I really enjoyed it.

I enjoyed the kind of over the topness of it and the madness of it, and the kind of trippyness of it, and I thought for the first time, I thought when I saw it that that particular screening, I thought how kind of flat and horrible it might have been unforgettable, had any other director done it, you know.

And for all the eyebrow raising or head scratching that can just happen to the project. He did make something with, I think, an incredible amount of energy and skill and exuberance, you know, which is part of the farrow that he ploughed and the kind of style that he'd established.

But like I say, I ended up being very proud and at peace in a way, after being kind of confused, what do I make about, you never know what to make of your own work, but I thought, no, I'm at peace with that, it is what it is.

Some people will like it, some people won't and it's kind of one of those things that that OK. Not everyone will like it, and a lot of people don't like it, but they'll be somewhere, someone out there will think is their favourite film and doesn't like to think of it.

Is there someone out there thinking, that is my number one film and that's OK.