



AVI FEDERGREEN: PASSIONATE PRODUCER

What makes Avi run? A love for Canadian indie cinema propels this former location manager and line producer into the limelight of executive film production.

by ADAM NAYMAN

Forget about *Avatar* and *Transformers: Dark of the Moon*. If you want to see a truly spectacular example of 3-D filmmaking, look no further than André De Toth's 1953 chiller *House of Wax*, starring Vincent Price as a sculptor whose figurines are uncannily lifelike. As the first major American studio film to utilize 3-D technology, *House of Wax* was a novelty at the time of its release, but it hasn't lost its power over the decades. Just ask Avi Federgreen.

"When I was 10 years old, I saw *House of Wax* on television," says the Edmonton-born producer. "I pointed at the set and said to my dad, 'That's what I want to do.' He said he didn't understand. I said, 'I want to be the person who makes that.'"

Nearly 40 years later, Federgreen has become the guy who helps to make movies. And, in a rather poetic turn of events, he's currently executive-producing a 3-D horror film: the Canadian zombie opus *Dead Before Dawn*, starring Christopher Lloyd and Kevin McDonald. "It's the first time Telefilm has ever financed a 3-D movie," says Federgreen. "[They] were obviously very cautious about what sort of project they were going to support for their first kick at that can. Tim Doiron and April Mullen had been developing this project for a number of years. It's funny and fresh and not like stuff we've seen before. And we're making it for a small budget."

That last point is a familiar refrain for Federgreen, whose ascent over the past two decades from the deep trenches of Canadian film work to co-producing the opening night film at the Toronto International Film Festival (2010's *Score! A Hockey Musical*) has come without abandoning the bottom-line principles he brought over from his previous life in the computer business. Federgreen had always been interested in movies—as a teenager he had helped to manage a multiplex at the West Edmonton Mall—but it wasn't until an old friend living in Toronto offered him a job on a set that he had any inkling of getting into the business.

"My best friend, Byron Martin, was working on a Canadian-Swiss co-production called *Waiting For Michelangelo*, and he asked me if I wanted to work as a P.A. He said that I wasn't going to like the work, that it was mostly picking up cigarette butts and throwing out garbage, and that I was going to go home each day smelling like a trash can. I said that as long as it gets me into the business, my response was 'Whatever.' So I went from an \$80,000-a-year job to making about \$19,000 my first year in film."

From there, Federgreen quickly developed a reputation as somebody who was willing to work in a number of different capacities. He found gigs as a location manager on a number of Toronto-based productions and began making some important contacts—people he respected but was also willing to nudge for better opportunities. A stint as a location manager on the metaphysical drama series *Twice in a Lifetime* (a Canadian gloss on *Quantum Leap* minus the science-fiction underpinnings) led Federgreen to ask the experienced producer Marilyn Stonehouse for a chance to do more. Recognizing his ambition, she gave him a crack at being the show's production manager, which gave him a new professional niche.

Steady employment followed. Federgreen says that his most truly transformative experience was a subsequent gig as the production manager on *It's Me...Gerald*, a sort of proto-*Curb Your Enthusiasm* that was shot in the Yukon. "Going there changed my life," he says. "It was one of those spiritual things that comes along once in a blue moon." It started a run where his name started appearing on a string of major Canadian films as a line producer or associate producer, including TIFF selections like

Emotional Arithmetic (2007) and *All Hat* (2007). His rep at the time was of somebody who was willing to do pretty much anything to get the film over any hurdles and onto the screen—a quality that endeared him to his new collaborators.

"The first time I saw Avi was across the table at an OMDC industry consultation-type meeting," says *All Hat* producer Jennifer Jonas. "His passion in that crowded room made an impression. *All Hat* was an ambitious project at that budget level, with all those races and horses; what was unique was Avi's immediate response when I asked him if he'd be willing to walk the line with me—meaning that he'd help me get every available dollar on the screen without the safety net of leaving the contingency unspent.

"When I was 10 years old, I saw *House of Wax* on television. I pointed and said to my dad, 'I want to be the person who makes that!'"
— Avi Federgreen

He immediately said yes, and we have had the good fortune of working together many times since. Apart from his different hair lengths, Avi doesn't change. He's always his refreshing, passionate self."

Federgreen is grateful for what he's learned from Jonas and her partner in New Real Films (and in life), Leonard Farlinger. (Their latest film, *I'm Yours*, will start cruising the festival circuit this fall.) "I've always been grateful for all the advice I've been given over the years," he says. "I'm like a junkie when it comes to learning about the business."

He got another crash course in pushing a film over the finish line when he signed on as a line producer for Michael McGowan's cross-country odyssey, *One Week*. It's a project that started with Federgreen doubting that its maker would be able to pull it off. "They called me with Mike McGowan on the phone and asked me what I thought of the script," he says. "I loved it, but I asked them about the budget. I said that they couldn't do it for \$1.8 million dollars, and

Top to bottom,
on the sets of: *One Week*
Michael McGowan
(Canada, 2008)

Score! A Hockey Musical
Michael McGowan
(Canada, 2010)

Hungry Hills
Rob King
(Canada, 2010)



Photos courtesy of: Mongrel Media (*One Week*; *Score! A Hockey Musical*); Avi Federgreen (*Hungry Hills*). Photography by Peter Stranks (bottom, *One Week*)

Mike said 'Then I guess you don't want to do it?' I said 'Fuck it.' And then we did the impossible. Mike is one of the most unbelievable directors I've ever worked with—a dear friend and a true partner. We went down the road together from Toronto to Tofino for \$1.8 million dollars and made a movie that we think is a classic and that will stand the test of time."

Whatever one thinks of *One Week*—or, for that matter, *Score! A Hockey Musical*—there's no question that Federgreen's belief in a populist filmmaking instinct makes him something of a rarity in a country where the great majority of producers (and filmmakers) are still locked into the post-Cronenberg auteurist model. "I think that reviewers sometimes don't give Canadian films a break," says Federgreen when it's pointed out that there's a disparity between what audiences think of *One Week* and the notices from critics. "Critics can be harsher on our stuff than they are on American movies. If you read every review for every Canadian film that was reviewed this year, how many of them would be positive? We're supposed to be the nicest people in the entire world, but we sure don't always show it when it comes to our own cinema."

One film that Federgreen worked on that did get good reviews from the highbrow set was Reg Harkema's gonzo and Godardian *Leslie, My Name is Evil* (2009). "I love Reg," says Federgreen, "because he doesn't fit inside a box." That Federgreen is able to reconcile his taste for crowd-pleasing entertainment in the McGowan-esque vein with Harkema's meta-cinematic provocation could be an indicator of either omnivorous taste or simply the drive to work steadily, but either way, he's not one to pigeonhole himself into a single mode of moviemaking. This flexibility has led him to forays into producing

for television (on Ken Finkleman's characteristically caustic *Good Dog*) and also steering shorts like Annie Bradley's acclaimed *Pudge* (2008) and features like *Hungry Hills*, directed by Rob King, toward slots at TIFF. "One of my goals when I started out was that within 15 years, I would produce my own movie," he says. "George Ryga's *Hungry Hills* was the film that gave me that credit for the first time."

Federgreen obviously enjoyed the feeling, because it seems like he's trying to get his name on as many projects as possible; he estimates that he has about 20 films in development right now. "*One Week* was sort of a calling card for me in terms of optioning stuff. I'm always looking at material, reading, thinking about what kind of stuff I'd want to watch, trying to build a catalogue. I think I read 50 to 100 scripts a year, and 20 to 50 novels. If you don't read, you don't find anything." It's a punishing pace, but Federgreen says it suits him fine. "I'm a workaholic. I don't like to sit around while time goes by. If there's something that appeals to me and that has potential, I won't pass it by. I don't want to have any regrets in my life about things I wish I'd done."

That explains why, in the midst of everything else, Federgreen says he plans to open up his own distribution company in the next few years. He says that his mandate is to try to help



more Canadian indies make it into movie theatres. While he does his best to be diplomatic, it's clear that this is something of a sore point. "It's hard to get a movie financed in Canada or to get a distributor to attach themselves to you," he says flatly. "Some distributors won't touch low-budget movies, which is unfortunate because there's great work being done."

The question is whether, after being on so many sets, Federgreen thinks he has it in him to be a director himself: to be the guy behind the camera. For all his apparent confidence, he's pretty modest on this matter. "I think you have to have the right makeup to be a director, and my creative thing is being able to add commentary and give my input. I couldn't carry that weight. I know business, I know money, I know finance and marketing. That stuff is in my blood. Directing is something that other people are born with—it flows through their veins like wine. People like Don McKellar, Bruce McDonald, Patricia Rozema and Kari Skogland... it's an amazing group in this country."

Even if Federgreen doesn't want to direct, he has definite ideas about cinema and, perhaps remembering his own awe at seeing *House of Wax* all those years ago, they mostly have to do with getting through to an audience. "How do you know you've made a good movie?" he asks. "I think it's about how people go out afterwards to a coffee shop and talk about it for hours on end. I don't care about the box office, the Golden Reel. That's not success. If people can relate to a film, if it speaks to them, if they're affected by it... for me, that's a successful movie."

Adam Nayman writes on film for Cinema Scope, Montage, POV, Cineaste and The Grid.

Far left and bottom: On the set of *Dead Before Dawn* April Mullen (Canada, 2011)

Left, top to bottom: *Leslie, My Name is Evil* Bruce McDonald (Canada, 2009)

One Week Michael McGowan (Canada, 2008)

Avi Federgreen with Alison Waxman at the 2011 ACTRA Awards.

Scouting in the Yukon for *A Discovery of Strangers* (in development)

Photography by James van der Woerd (*Dead Before Dawn*); Peter Stranks (top, *One Week*); Jeremy Jemec (bottom, *One Week*); Leah Jaunzens (ACTRA Awards); Hector Mackenzie