

OPERA

A peek backstage during filming shows method to the madness of Italy's Alfred Hitchcock.

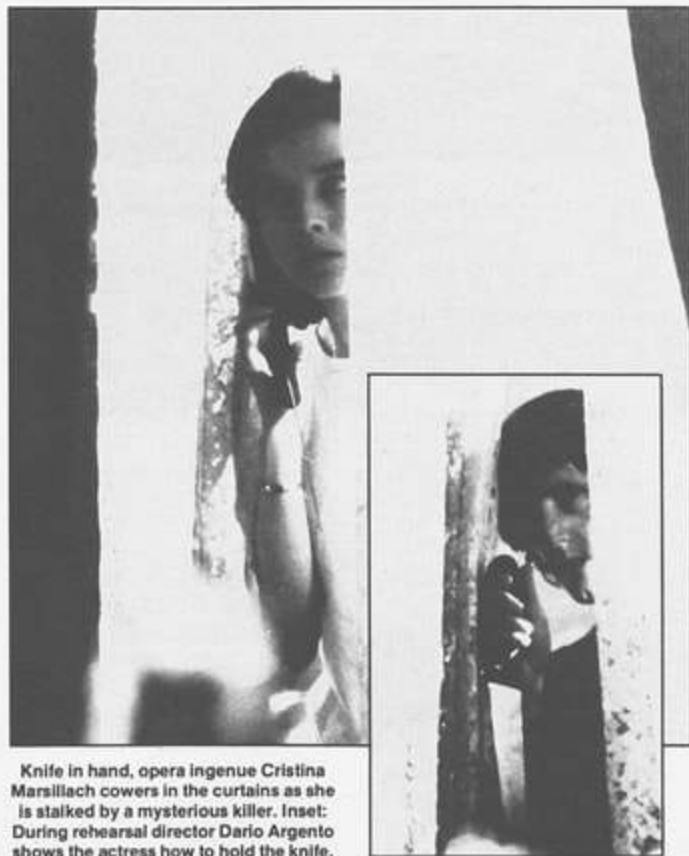
By Alan Jones

"I've had the same nightmare I used to have as a child. But I can't decide if it's simply a dream or a memory of something that really happened."

The script of OPERA

Via Monserrato, situated in Rome's oldest quarter, is one of the many locations for Dario Argento's latest entry in the horror genre, infused with a distinctive style he has made well and truly his own. OPERA is "the Italian Hitchcock's" tenth film production and with a budget of \$8 million, his most expensive. While setting up an elaborate Steadicam shot against the backdrop of a man-made thunderstorm, curious on-lookers are constantly passing by, recognizing the most prolific of all Italian directors in action and congregating in ever increasing, and alarming, numbers. The cries of "Ecco Argento," "Ciao Dario"—and more pointedly "Who is the killer?"—are all that's needed to prove to any outsider unused to such an amazing show of affection for one of Italy's greatest exports that OPERA is the most eagerly awaited event on this year's Roman film calendar. Released in Rome at Christmas, the filming was also Italy's best kept secret.

Scripted by Argento and his collaborator on CREEPERS (1985), Franco Ferrini, nobody has been allowed to read the



Knife in hand, opera ingenue Cristina Marsillach cowers in the curtains as she is stalked by a mysterious killer. Inset: During rehearsal director Dario Argento shows the actress how to hold the knife.

last three pages of the script where the identity of the paranoid schizophrenic responsible for a series of murders in an opera house is revealed. The secrecy—including a closed set policy—has sent Argento's coterie of fans and the *paparazzi* into such a frenzy that the crew's sanity is constantly under threat by the sheer volume of questions relating to plot details asked by the most

unlikely of people. The pathological fear Argento has of being ripped-off by the most notorious cinema industry in the world led him to plant a story in *Variety* which stated OPERA was going to be his answer to films like Martin Scorsese's AFTER HOURS—a remark any Argento scholar will be amused by, because, if anything, Scorsese's film was his answer to the work of both

Mario Bava and Argento.

OPERA is big news indeed on Argento's own home front. After the disappointment in boxoffice terms of CREEPERS (aka PHENOMENA) outside Italy (Argento feels it's the best, most personal film he's made), OPERA is seen as a return to form by those close to him and the technicians working on the production. It has been an arduous 15 week shoot dogged by bad luck and a strain on the actors unused to Argento's style of direction which uses the shooting script as nothing more than a rough guide. Starring in what Argento promises will be "an aria of violence beyond imagination" are Ian Charleson, Cristina Marsillach, Urbano Barberini, Daria Nicolodi, Antonella Vitale, Coraline Tassoni, Mirella D'Angelo, Karl Zinny, Barbara Cupisti and Gyorsy Rath Gyorivanky.

Apart from CHARIOTS OF FIRE and GHANDI star, Ian Charleson, and Spanish model-turned-actress Cristina Marsillach, who makes her Italian film debut, all the other actors have an association with Argento somewhere along the line. Barberini and Zinny appeared in Lamberto Bava's DEMONS, produced by Argento. Tassoni played in DEMONS 2. Mirella D'Angelo starred in TENEBRAE. Daria Nicolodi, Argento's former girlfriend, has been an icon of all his films since DEEP RED, although for personal reasons

she refused to appear in *SUSPIRIA*, which she co-wrote with him. Antonella Vitale is the new girl in Argento's personal life. Barbara Cupisti, the well-known star of the hit European soap opera "Chateau Vallon," played the lead in Michele Soavi's directorial debut *STAGEFRIGHT-AQUARIUS*, an extraordinary homage to Argento's film career. Gyorivanky is the head of an avant-garde theatrical group much admired by the Argento clan.

Special make-up effects are the work of two Argento veterans, Rosario Prestopino and Sergio Stivaletti. Two other new additions to Dario Argento's baroque drama troupe are Richard Attenborough's favorite cameraman, Ronnie Taylor—the first time ever Argento has used an Englishman as director of photography—and New Age music composer Brian Eno who, along with classical additions from Verdi and Puccini, wrote the soundtrack.

OPERA began shooting on the 25th of May in Parma, a town 100 kilometers south-east of Milan, at the Teatro Regio Opera House in the heart of Giuseppe Verdi country. Argento had wanted to film at La Scala but Italy's premiere opera site was unavailable due to an inordinately successful season. Additional location work took place at Lugano, Switzerland, and all the interiors were filmed at the De Paolis Studios on the outskirts of Rome. Argento has an affection for De Paolis as all his previous films were made there and, whereas other directors have always cited Cinecittà in terms of the best facilities available, Argento seems to thrive in the rather dilapidated surroundings of what has now become a television oriented studio. De Paolis is where the New York set for Sergio Leone's *ONCE UPON A TIME IN AMERICA* still stands and the office corridors, rooftops and central fish pond will be recognizable to those *au fait* with schlockmeister Lucio Fulci's more recent output.

“Dario Argento is the very best director working in Italy. He is a man who gives everything to his art, even his life.”

— Assistant director Michele Soavi —



Asked what he's doing in an Italian horror film, *GHANDI* and *CHARIOTS OF FIRE* star Ian Charleson replied, "My friends are all asking me the same question!"

OPERA is a Mario and Vittorio Cecchi Gori co-production with Argento's own DAC film company—for tax reasons the credits will list the latter as the anagram ADC. The Cecchi Gori's have their own distribution company called C.G. Silver, which releases most of Orion's product in Italy although they are more well known for their home-grown down-market comedy films such as two recent Adriano Celentano starring vehicles, *JOAN LUI* and *IL BURBERO*. Because of the Cecchi Gori brothers' link with Italy's major television network RAI, a presale to that channel has allowed Argento more budgetary scope than he has previously been used to. And the extra money was needed because every shot contained in OPERA features up to the minute state-of-the-art camera techniques and the most *outré* special effects Argento has ever devised.

Originally OPERA was to have been backed by the man responsible for accidentally launching Argento's directorial career in 1969—Goffredo Lombardo, head of the Titanus Distribution Company.

Argento was the film critic for the Rome daily newspaper *Paese Sera* when spaghetti western king Sergio Leone offered him and Bernardo Bertolucci the chance to storyboard *ONCE UPON A TIME IN THE WEST*. Because of Argento's father, Salvatore, a key figure in the Italian film community in the '50s due to his public relations work with Unitalia, the government organization which promoted and popularized Italian cinema exports in the world market place, Argento had grown up knowing everybody in the industry. (Argento's earliest childhood memory is sitting on Sophia Loren's knee!) So the Leone connection, like the many aborted attempts by Dino De Laurentiis to coax a film out of a family friend, is easy to explain. Argento and Bertolucci's combined fee for *ONCE UPON A TIME IN THE WEST* was \$1600 but it led to Argento doing script rewrites on films like *TODAY IT'S ME, TOMORROW IT'S YOU*, *FIVE MAN ARMY* and *SEXUAL REVOLUTION*.

When Argento wrote the screenplay for *METTI UNA SERA A CENA*, which at-

tracted universally good reviews, Goffredo Lombardo asked Argento to become his assistant to read and revise all the scripts Titanus were considering producing. Early in 1969 Bertolucci insisted Argento read a thriller he was optioning as the basis for a future project. The book was *The Screaming Mimi* by Frederic Brown and the themes contained in this novel—issued in Italy in a yellow dust jacket, the term 'giallo', meaning yellow in Italian, later came to be applied to Argento's work—were to infiltrate Argento's filmic *oeuvre* to the present day. While on holiday in Tunisia, Argento fashioned the screenplay for *THE BIRD WITH THE CRYSTAL PLUMAGE* (1970) from Brown's ideas, his high regard for Mario Bava's seminal thriller *THE EVIL EYE* (1962) and the central concept of a fish trapped in an aquarium (Tony Musante imprisoned between two glass doors witnessing the pivotal attempted murder).

But Lombardo was loath to produce the film as a debut vehicle for the aspiring director and wanted tried and tested Terence Young instead, as *WAIT UNTIL DARK* had been a massive Italian boxoffice success. Bowing to pressure from Salvatore Argento who agreed to oversee the production, Lombardo was mortified after the first week's rushes and tried to replace Argento with Ferdinando Baldi, but Argento's contract was watertight, thanks to his father's sound business sense. As a result, *THE BIRD WITH THE CRYSTAL PLUMAGE* became Titanus' biggest moneymaker, firmly establishing the Argento name with genre enthusiasts all over the world. A recent corporate split of the Titanus production arm away from the distribution side meant Lombardo's initial interest in producing OPERA was sadly stillborn.

In common with all of Argento's previous films, the central idea behind OPERA has been an obsession with Argento for years, just waiting for the right moment of filmic fruition. *CAT O'NINE TAILS* (1971) was born out of his love

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DARIO ARGENTO'S WORLD OF HORROR

STYLE TRIUMPHS OVER CONTENT, A PRIMER FOR THE UNINITIATED

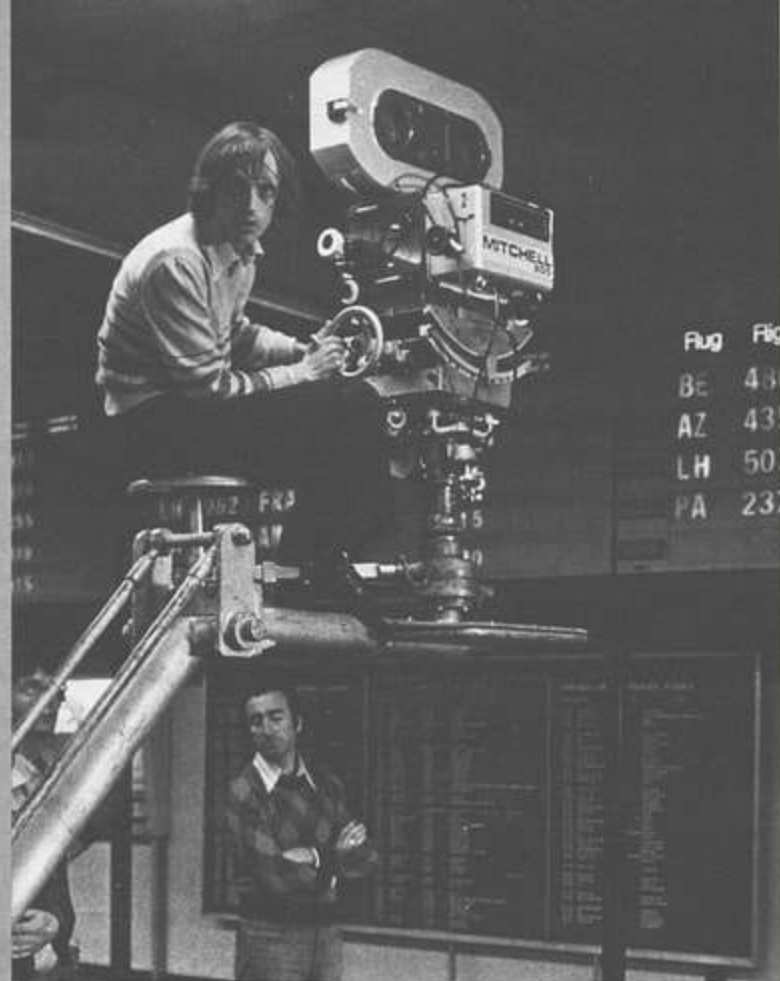
By Alan Jones

"I have no secrets. Violence is a means of communication, a way of expressing myself. I am attracted to violence because it is a phenomenon of our times, a new form of protest and a refusal of all the established values. My films are primal screams which kindred souls can recognize and respond to."

So speaks Dario Argento, the foremost Italian director working in the horror genre today. Although Argento readily admits to borrowing ideas and freely adapting themes that are personal favorites, he never follows a trend. Instead his work has been a trend setter. In many ways Argento is the dark alter-ego of the American dream machine duo George Lucas and Steven Spielberg. If

Lucas and Spielberg have their cinematic roots in old serials, Disney wonderment, and David Lean epics, then Argento's redefinition of filmic nostalgia can be closely allied to Ricardo Freda's rich visual sense, Fritz Lang's unique composition, and Hitchcock's off-beat story perception.

Born in 1940 of Italian/Brazilian parentage, Argento's first "giallo" thriller burst on an unsuspecting world in 1970 with such an impact that the resonance can still be felt today in the more down-market exploitive end of the Italian film industry. *THE BIRD WITH THE CRYSTAL PLUMAGE* (1970) provided ample opportunity for audience participation in the true Hitchcock tradition by repeating all-important flashbacks to the



Argento lines up the sweeping crane shot that opens *TENEBRAE* (1982).

crucial scene of author Tony Musante knowing something was wrong with an attempted murder he witnessed—but what? Argento's penchant for horrific set pieces became his trademark beginning with this first glossy, stylistic, cosmopolitan whodunnit. Suzy Kendall barricading the door to her apartment as a maniac climbs the stairs; the striking use of visual impotence to establish Musante's writer's block and sexual obsession with a murderer he is always failing to catch—Argento traps him between the glass doors of an art gallery entrance. The use of sharply contrasted black and whites and the theme of an alienated artist caught up in a paranoid nightmare became signatures of Argento's subsequent films.

Argento claimed the major thrust behind his second film, *CAT O'NINE TAILS* (1971) was, "to transfer to the detective thriller the sort of violence Sergio Leone put in his westerns." Visually superior to his first film, *CAT O'NINE TAILS* was nevertheless a struggle to give tone and stylish elegance

to undistinguished material, a tortuous mystery combining industrial espionage, homosexuality and the theory that a person's criminal tendencies can be discovered by studying the subject's chromosomes. The identity of the murderer, a character of secondary importance, was beside the point to Argento who was more concerned with making the audience part of the crimes. Tight subliminal close-ups of the killer's eye shifting to methodical point-of-view camera movements made the murders galvanizing to watch. *CAT O'NINE TAILS* set the tenor of Argento's filmic oeuvre in its triumph of style over content. Commenting on the film's subjective opening Argento said, "I wanted the audience flung into the violence within seconds because this is the way it always happens—suddenly and without warning."

In *FOUR FLIES ON GREY VELVET* (1972), Argento's use of subjective camerawork to involve an audience reached its artistic peak. The title, referring to the last image contained on a murder victim's retina, is

Argento directs a blood-soaked performer in *INFERNO* (1979), the second installment of the director's unfinished Three Mothers trilogy begun by *SUSPIRIA*.





Argento (right) on the New York City location for *INFERNO* with Mario Bava (center), who supervised the film's special effects, and Bava's son, Lamberto.

the only clue to the identity of a maniac who is persecuting and mentally torturing jazz musician, Michael Brandon. As the supposed victim Brandon has been accused of murdering turns his back to the camera, a metal candlestick comes shockingly into frame and a fast forward tracking shot makes the audience the killer. Only once does the camera shift emphasis, as the candlestick bludgeons the camera lens. This typical example of radical editing has come to define the Argento style—one which mainstream critics have labeled as gratuitously sadistic. In his own defense Argento said, "These sequences are meant for cathartic purposes only. *FOUR FLIES ON GREY VELVET* was never meant to be a precursor to the slasher film. How else can one put a psychotic killer across on that thematic level unless you make it disturbing for those watching?"

With the Italian film industry falling over itself to copy the Argento formula with pot-boilers like *TORSO* (1975), and more pointedly *FIVE GRASSHOPPERS IN SILK SCARVES*, it soon became apparent that only Dario Argento could make an Argento film. It was this reasoning which led Rizzoli Films to finance *DEEP RED* (1975),

without a doubt Argento's masterpiece within the "giallo" format. *DEEP RED* came from an idea which Argento could never satisfactorily work out—that of a married couple stalked individually by a masked assailant who find out each other is equally responsible. David Hemmings witnesses the murder of a psychic who earlier felt the vibrations of a maniac fearing discovery at a parapsychology convention. Once again the protagonist realizes he's stumbled onto a clue and takes the rest of the movie to work it out. With red the predominant color, *DEEP RED* was Argento's baroque stepping stone to the more gothic settings of his next two films and his use of music, by the group *Goblin*—after *Deep Purple* became unavailable—proved inspirational in their writing.

"Fear," said Argento, "is a 370 degree centigrade body temperature. With *SUSPIRIA* I wanted 400°!" In *SUSPIRIA* (1976) Argento pushed the farthest boundaries of suspense into new areas through a devastating use of deafening music, lush decor, special effects and dazzling lighting, achieved by filming with an outmoded Technicolor stock. It was a breakthrough to new levels of cinematic sensation as

it took hero Jessica Harper beyond an investigation of a friend's death at a German ballet school into a world of witchcraft and the supernatural. Although *SUSPIRIA* never rebounds from the high shock impact of the opening 20 minutes due to a weak script, it is the film Argento buffs most fondly remember. Its experimental form—indirect light softened and absorbed glare so Argento could change the actor's complexions and pre-recorded *Goblin* music was used to choreograph action on set—made it a three ring circus experience which doubled, in Argento's mind, as the magical chaos lurking beneath everyday reality. *SUSPIRIA* proved Argento had his finger on the pulse of audience expectation and while he scoffed at being called "the Fellini of Italian horror," the film did contain self-conscious nods to his growing cult status. Included in the cast was Joan Bennett, Fritz Lang's wife, and the ultimate murder weapon was a sharp crystal dagger plucked from the plumage of an ornamental bird.

After combining his talents with George Romero to co-produce *DAWN OF THE DEAD*, Argento turned his attention to *INFERNO* (1979), the second of a planned Three Mothers trilogy begun in *SUSPIRIA* using ideas from DeQuincey's diary "Confessions of an Opium Eater." Where *SUSPIRIA* found Argento never summoning the courage to abandon narrative completely—the script kept braking while the visuals, crammed with action and color in an

appealing vulgar display, drove relentlessly forward to the next set piece—*INFERNO* became all set pieces and therefore a complete whole. *INFERNO*, Argento's undisputed masterpiece, was an alchemic tapestry which, like the music world it was set in played variations on a symphonic theme as a brother and sister tried to find the lair of the Mother of Darkness in New York. This narrative looseness took on nightmare dimensions as Argento's approach made ordinary, often arbitrary, events mysterious and horrifying in a dream-like comic art landscape where sheer technical brilliance became the only essential plot conveyance.

Filming *INFERNO* took its toll on Argento's health and with other Italian directors, most notably Lucio Fulci, swamping the gothic field, Argento decided to switch direction once again, back to the Sir Arthur Conan Doyle inspired "giallo" film. Argento's 1982 feature *TENEBRAE* (aka *UNSANE*) was an attempt to examine the horrors of random violence within the faintly futuristic confines of *THE BIRD WITH THE CRYSTAL PLUMAGE* milieu. *PHENOMENA* followed in 1984 (aka *CREEPERS*) and was Argento's autobiographical delve into the dark side of adolescent experience, both sexual and obsessional. It was at this time he produced *DEMONS* and *DEMONS 2*, directed by Lamberto Bava, under the auspices of his own company, DAC Films. He and Bava are now preparing *DEMONS 3*. □

Argento directs the Mother of Darkness in *SUSPIRIA* (1976), the director's first foray into gothic horror and the film most fondly remembered by Argento buffs.



for the thriller films TWISTED NERVE and THE SPIRAL STAIRCASE. Hitchcock's TORN CURTAIN and Val Lewton's THE LEOPARD MAN are easily recognizable as the starting point for FOUR FLIES ON GREY VELVET (1972), his admitted homage to Fritz Lang. The springboard for DEEP RED (1976) was Argento's unsuccessful attempt at optioning Agatha Christie's *Three Blind Mice* for the umpteenth time. SUSPIRIA (1977) was a combination of SNOW WHITE, De Quincey's *Confessions of an Opium Eater* and the true story of collaborator Daria Nicolodi's mother attending a school with witchcraft a major part of the curriculum. When Argento witnessed tourists being gunned down in Los Angeles, TENEBRAE (1982) began to form. And when Argento attended a vegetarian health clinic in Zurich, the strict regimen reminded him of his schooldays—the genesis of CREEPERS (1985).

"For years I've been annoyed by people covering their eyes during the unspooling of the gorier moments in my films," said Argento. "I film these images because I want people to see them and not avoid the positive confrontation of their fears by looking away. So I thought to myself, 'How would it be possible to achieve this and force someone to watch the most gruesome murder and make sure they can't avert their eyes?' The answer I came up with is the core of what OPERA is all about. The psychopath in OPERA is so obsessed by the young ingenue opera singer, a spectacle of devotion is required. She is kidnapped and taken to the opera basement where she is tied to a chair. Then needles are strapped under her eyes so if she tries to close them her eyelids will be pierced and the pain will be so great she will have to keep them open. And then the murder of someone is orchestrated in front of her while she is powerless to act or look away. The murderer needs her to see it all as her enforced restraint will bring the ultimate orgasm—the perpetration of death being the clearest act of love".

Although this warped obses-

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Argento directs Cristina Marsillach as Betty, a young ingenue who takes over the lead role in "MacBeth" when the opera's star is murdered by a mysterious killer.

sion is the sum total of what lies at the heart of OPERA's narrative construction, Argento admits that the rest of the movie is as full of complicated herrings with the red sort of plumage as the rest of his work. The plot basically deals with an opera company putting on a sumptuous production of Verdi's "Macbeth"—a work well known for attracting bad luck on and behind the stage. As the curtain is about to come up, the leading Diva, Mara Cecova, has an accident and—in the tradition of backstage musicals—Betty (Cristina Marsillach), the promising ingenue understudy, takes over to receive a standing ovation. (Vanessa Redgrave had been contracted to play the part of Cecova but arrived at Rome's Fiumicino airport and demanded more money. When Argento refused to increase her salary for what was simply a prologue cameo, she took the next plane back to London. Her role was subsequently excised and all that now remains is an off-screen scream of pain).

Deciding to capitalize on Betty's imminent stardom, Marco (Ian Charleson), the opera director, adds more production value to the staging by utilizing a flock of ravens in key areas for intensified dramatic effect. But then other "accidents" start occurring which all seem to center around Betty. And when someone mysteriously dies, Betty's agent, Myra (Daria Nicolodi), is ready to call in Inspector Urbano Barberini to investigate, especially when a member of the cast says she holds a clue to the killer's identity—an initialed gold chain which she has swallowed for safe keeping. Meanwhile the ever watchful and increasingly dangerous ravens know who the killer is and begin to unmask the culprit themselves.

"I'm treating the ravens as integral characters," explained Argento. "But the problem in using birds is everyone screams Hitchcock. I'm used to that comparison by now so I don't really care. My major reason for writing them into the script was so I could be really inventive with Louma crane and

Skycam-like shots." In OPERA Argento intends to top his much talked about sequence in TENEBRAE where the camera crept over the roof of a house to witness the murderer breaking through a window. It begins with a dazzling raven's eye point of view shot starting at the Opera House roof and ends up on Cristina Marsillach's shoulder after swooping across the audience and flying around a couple of on-stage actors.

"If anything," said Argento, "OPERA has a connection with SUSPIRIA because in that film I purposefully wanted to use every new technique available to engage the audience. Here every sequence contains a camera trick. The state-of-the-art has made considerable advances since 1976."

Argento's first Hollywood movie, seen while on vacation with his brother and sister, was the Claude Rains version of THE PHANTOM OF THE OPERA. But he assured, "OPERA is completely different although, frankly, I'm expecting that association. Throughout my entire career I've only ever been interested in remaking two films if ever the opportunity arose and my soul was ready. Just after FIVE DAYS IN MILAN, Luigi Cozzi (co-writer of FOUR FLIES ON GREY VELVET and director of STARCRASH, ALIEN CONTAMINATION, HERCULES and OUTLAW OF GOR), and I wrote a version of FRANKENSTEIN set in Hitler's Germany." With Timothy Dalton set to star, the package was offered to Universal and then Michael Carreras of Hammer Films. The failure to ignite enthusiasm from either company rests squarely on the comparisons made between Frankenstein's monster and Nazism, according to Argento. He continued, "And after SUSPIRIA the idea of remaking THE PHANTOM OF THE OPERA was discussed as the basic story really impressed me. But my curiosity in seeing real violence depicted on screen—even though it may repulse me—outweighed the thoughts of

coming to grips with what in essence is a fairy-tale fantasy."

The real reason why OPERA is set in the backstage operatic world is linked to events which happened in 1985. The management of the Sferisterio Theatre in Macerata approached Argento to direct a stage version of Verdi's "Rigoletto." With makeup designs storyboarded by Sergio Stivaletti, Argento's interpretation of the classic opera included turning the character of the Duke into a perverted vampire. With Argento well into pre-production, word filtered back that purists simply would not accept another outrageous literal version of a much beloved masterwork. Only the year before at the same theatre Ken Russell had directed his own vision of Puccini's "La Boheme" featuring Nazi icons and the central character, Mimi, dying of a heroin overdose. The growing scandal meant Argento was replaced by director Mauro Bolognini and a more classic adaptation was staged. Nevertheless the dramatic possibilities which lay in the shadowy tension-filled backstage atmosphere of the opera had been firmly planted in Argento's richly fertile mind.

Franco Ferrini, Argento's script collaborator on OPERA, also has a real affection for Verdi. "It was Ferrini who was directly responsible for the inclusion of "Va Pensiero" in the auditorium sequence in INFERNO," explained Argento. "I like Verdi, but not *that* much, although its use in INFERNO together with the camera movements are considered some of the best work I've done, so much so I'm expecting comparisons to be made between the two films. It was the look backstage at Sferisterio which excited me—all grey movement, dramatic lighting and never knowing what was lurking in the shadows. OPERA will probably be remembered as my most composed film, as the first part is nothing but interiors. All the exterior shots occur in the latter stages. I wanted to describe on film the feelings I couldn't shake off when soaking in the atmosphere of the opera world. I hope my name coupled with

"I hope the name Dario Argento, coupled with the title OPERA, is going to provoke an appealing reaction of shocked disbelief."

- Director Dario Argento -



Car interiors in a rainstorm are filmed by Argento for OPERA using a mini-swimming pool set-up at DePaolis studios (above). Argento is able to view the takes from afar (below), using a video monitor, technology considered a luxury in Italy.



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Many film critics and historians believe that Argento's use of visuals and camera angles echo those of Mario Bava. So much so that Bava is now—wrongly—always credited as his mentor. But the truth according to Argento has more to do with being influenced by the work of another Italian director, Riccardo Freda. "In my youth I heard a story about Freda which greatly impressed me," explained Argento. "He was filming a scene for one of his movies involving a girl being chained to a wall about

to be tortured. The girl wasn't giving him enough emotion so when the crew broke for lunch after wasting an entire morning, trying to capture a credible performance, Freda left her chained up alone in the studio. By the time they returned, she was so angry and upset at the way she had been treated, the first take of the afternoon was all they needed. In many ways I have followed this guideline ever since—not just with regard to the actors, but my own creative approach as well. The most extreme example of this was when I made INFERNO. I was seriously ill with hepatitis throughout the whole

production, a memory which still pains me when I think of that film."

Just ask OPERA star Cristina Marsillach to bear out this theory. Or more to the point, don't. "I never give interviews," said the ex-model turned actress who has appeared in a few Spanish films—1919, ADOLESCENCIA, I'M IN CRISIS, and LATE AFTERNOON WITH THERESA—and had a small role in the recent international co-production EVERYTIME WE SAY GOODBYE, directed by Moshe Mishrazi. The sister of pop-star Blanca Marsillach had a much publicized and infamous affair with the son of Spanish director Carlos Saura and earned for herself a whole Italian/English dictionary set of phrases for her actions on the OPERA set, the least offensive of which was "uncooperative."

Argento had at first wanted CREEPERS star Jennifer Connelly back in the role of Betty, but changed his mind as he didn't want any comparisons made between the two films, especially since the latter parts of both are similar. Then he actively sought Mia Sara, the star of LEGEND, but cancelled talks with her agent when fashion designer Giorgio Armani, a close friend, came back from Milan raving about a girl he had discovered on the catwalks. The girl was Marsillach and she landed the role. It was probably a career move the striking actress now wishes she had never made.

Although totally professional, Marsillach's ill-chosen remarks concerning an upcoming nude scene—"I am not starring in a porno movie!"—hardly endeared her to Argento's close knit family of technicians. The Italians have a saying "Revenge is a dish best served cold," but in this instance it proved too hot for Marsillach.

The sequence to be shot was set in the opera house basement constructed in the open air to allow the impending inferno of flames to escape upwards into the night air. Blindfolded, Marsillach had to shoot off the lock of the door, fail, glimpse the supposed body of the murderer con-

sumed by flames, grab a music stand and use it to poke the key from the pocket of the burning cadaver and open the door. In safety circumstances which would never be allowed on any other studio backlot in the world, the flames licked the actress until she burst through the door into Ian Charleson's arms. When she complained of the actual burn marks she received in the many takes it took before Argento was satisfied, it was doubtful there was even one person who felt even remotely sympathetic to her plight. Said Argento, "Fire and water are the two most important elements in all my films. I particularly love fire, as the actors give their strongest reaction when they feel they are in real danger."

Water, the other element Argento always includes in his films, was heavily used during the complicated Steadicam set-up on the Via Monserrato location, chosen because the curve in the road matched an exterior shot in Parma. In this sequence Cristina Marsillach had to run in the pouring rain to a telephone booth, attempt a call and then run down the street, all the time followed by Steadicam operator Tony Scaramuzzo zipping in and out of the choreographed traffic.

"We have to use rain machines because they give thick drops of water," said Argento. "I filmed the opening of *SUSPIRIA* three times in a real rainstorm before I admitted defeat. You couldn't see anything! I learned then that rain had to be faked to have any impact at all."

Cristina Marsillach, filmed by steadicam operator Tony Scaramuzzo, guided backwards, entering a phone booth on the Via Monserrato. The pole is a rain device.



The cast of *OPERA* on location at the Teatro Regio in Parma (l to r): Karl Zlunny, Mirella Daneelo, Gyorsy Györfvanky, Francesca Cassila, Coraline Tassoni, Ian Charleson, Argento and little girl, Cristina Marsillach, Antonella Vitale, and Urbano Barbarini.

As dawn broke, the all important car interiors still hadn't been shot because of water on the lens, and were scheduled for the following night. (Filming at night, even though on a soundstage, is mainly due to Argento being an insomniac. He remarked, "If I can't sleep at night, then neither can anyone else!")

Put into use the following evening is an elaborate mini-swimming pool construction, set up at De Paolis. With the car at the center being rocked by studio hands to simulate movement—an illusion compounded by other able bodies moving in and out of frame with neon

signs on rollers—Argento can view the confined actors by means of a video-link. *OPERA* is the first film in Italy to utilize this luxury item considered by many American technicians as a staple. Argento considers the car interior scenes in his movies as homages to both Michelangelo Antonioni's *THE PASSENGER* and the work of Jean-Luc Godard. This nuance is wasted on actor Ian Charleson who is the latest recipient of Cristina Marsillach's insensitivity. Said the critically lauded star, "This is the first time any actor has refused to let me feed them their lines off-camera. I'm surprised Cristina didn't want me there for reaction purposes as I know how much I've needed it in the past."

So what exactly is Charleson, more recently known for his television work in miniseries like *LOUISIANA*, doing starring in an Italian horror movie? He laughed, "My friends are asking me exactly the same question and I have yet to come up with a good answer! Seriously, my agent sent me the script and although I thought it was absolute nonsense I just couldn't put it down. I knew Dario's name because, like everyone else, I had seen *SUSPIRIA* and loved it. More recently Michele Soavi showed me *DEEP RED* and those two films are the sole reason why

I'm here. It would be dishonest of me to even say it required great acting ability. It doesn't at all, but Dario's constant improvisation on set has made this a far more rewarding experience than I ever expected."

Examples of the latter are many and varied mainly because, in keeping with most Italian movies intended for export these days, *OPERA* is being filmed with direct sound. "I've made up a number of lines over the past few weeks," said Charleson, "You really have to think fast when you suddenly chance on a gap in the script and all Dario says about it is 'Say a few words.' His encouragement has certainly provided me with a few choice self-penned gems. My favorite is 'The reviews are tearing us to pieces—but at least its only on paper!' I'm also adding my own little red herrings to the plot. At one stage I say about the wardrobe mistress 'I'd like to do her in'. Some of the script translation from Italian to English left a lot to be desired too. In the scene we are shooting now, for example, Cristina originally said to me in the car, 'I can't have sex with you. I'm frigid'. No girl would ever say that, so I pointed it out to Dario and it has been changed."

As far as Charleson is concerned, he didn't have to look too far afield for the real inspiration for his character of the

opera director. "He hasn't realized this yet but I'm basing Marco on my observations while watching Dario at work and his characteristic movements," said Charleson. "He'd better not be," cried Argento. "This film is not a celebration of the director. But if it helps Ian with his part then fine. Some of the events in the script have happened to me, I'll admit that, but Marco isn't a very nice man. I am. My life may be an open book but I don't want people knowing too much about me. I wish I hadn't learnt that as it now gives the film a resonance beyond what I'm trying to achieve."

Both Argento and Charleson have suffered linking tragedies while working on OPERA, considered by some as the "Macbeth" syndrome. During pre-production Argento's father died on April 19th after a long, lingering illness. And while on location in Parma, Charleson survived a near fatal car-crash leaving him in constant pain due to cracked ribs.

The major news event in Italy while OPERA was in production concerned the election of Cicciorina, an ex-pornographic film star, into the country's proportionally represented Parliament. This would never have happened except for the advent of cable television in Italy, in particular Silvio Berlusconi's Channel Five, which made it possible for eccentrics to find a ratings-hungry outlet as a political platform. And the effect the down-market cable channels are having on the Italian Film Industry is devastating. Rather than work at their craft, aspiring new actors are taking the easy route to instant fame via insipid comedy shows and trashy soap-operas. After a few MOR disco chart hits to maximize their high consumer profile, they vanish back into well-deserved obscurity. Industry veterans on the lookout for the new Marcello Mastroianni or Giancarlo Giannini are drawing blanks and employing anybody who has a slightly recognizable name, is good-looking or has made a couple of films in the past two years.

One such actor is Urbano Barberini who, like so many of his contemporaries, acciden-

"You really have to think fast when you suddenly chance on a gap in the script and all Dario says is, 'Say a few words.'"

- Performer Ian Charleson -



Cinematographer Ronnie Taylor on the Via Monserratto location for OPERA, dressed with a neon prop. Taylor has shot most of the films of Richard Attenborough.

tally entered the profession. One of the aristocratic Barberini family—they have a road in the center of Rome and a subway station named after them—Urbano can afford to pick and choose his roles because he isn't really doing it for the money. Argento liked his work in DEMONS and offered him the role of the Inspector in charge of murder investigations despite heavy speculation, thanks to a TV chat show, that the role was going to be offered to Bob Geldorf. Because Barberini was starring in MISS ARIZONA with Mastroianni and Hanna Schygulla while OPERA was in pre-production, dates were juggled so he could adhere to commitments on both pic-

tures. Strangely enough the two films Barberini appeared in prior to MISS ARIZONA could well have been dress rehearsals for OPERA.

"I studied opera for my small role in Franco Zeffirelli's OTELLO," said Barberini, "And working on the two GOR movies for 16 weeks helped me exercise my English, which has never been one of my strongest points." For the rising actor, who told his parents he was going skiing when in reality he was making his film debut, the endless hours of research he invests in each character he plays makes it all worthwhile. "I can't lie and I don't like to cheat an audience," he said. "Therefore I construct elaborate scenarios

for each character which I can believe in. This subtext is usually of my own invention. It is rarely in the script, but it helps me a lot, especially when a director like Dario actively encourages you to rewrite dialogue so you can include some of this fiction. In the case of OPERA, I wear my costumes off the set to make me more comfortable in the clothes my character would wear. I would still be preparing and never have been ready unless Dario hadn't said 'For God's sake, get on with it!'"

One scene in OPERA has Barberini having his eye pecked out by a raven courtesy of Rosario Prestopino's makeup. "Dario was very concerned about this," said Barberini, "He was worried that the eye makeup was too much and it would off-balance my performance. But I didn't mind. I told him you don't just act with one eye, you act with everything and he seemed very happy with that explanation. He leaves the actors very much alone. He hardly ever talks to them while they are working. I've heard rumors that many of the stars of his previous films have been bitter about this. But that's Dario. If he's unhappy about something he does give indicative signs. And watch out if you don't pick up on them!"

Recent directing assignments for Argento, following the release of CREEPERS, have included a fashion show and a television commercial. On the invitation of Trussardi, Argento directed the designer's 1986 fashion show intended for in-store promotional use. On a Milan catwalk, to the music of Pino Donnagio's BODY DOUBLE, Argento recreated the opening moments of SUSPIRIA, complete with rainstorm, and had the glamorous models stabbed to death, then elegantly carted off in see-through body bags. The half-hour video caused a storm of controversy when aired on a prime-time television news program.

Early in 1987 Argento was set to direct the San Remo Music Festival, one of Italy's

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SHOOTING ARGENTO'S SPECIAL EFFECTS

THE RAVENS OF OPERA CALLED FOR MAKEUP AND CAMERA TRICKS

By Alan Jones

The special effects of *OPERA* are the result of four teams of craftsmen. The responsibility of the prosthetic makeup fell to Rosario Prestopino. The optical effects were the work of London-based Roy Field and his Optical Film Effects Ltd. unit. The Corridori brothers executed one of *OPERA*'s major set pieces—in essence a reworking of Argento's famous slow motion bullet sequence from *FOUR FLIES ON GREY VELVET*. And all the shots involving the ravens became 29 year-old Sergio Stivaletti's domain.

It was Argento who gave makeup effects artist Stivaletti his first on-screen credit for his work in *CREEPERS* and subsequently handed him the

makeup chores on both *DEMONS* and *DEMONS 2*. Stivaletti's other recent credits include *MIAMI GOLEM* and *SPECTERS*. Like many other Italian technicians he is currently working on Terry Gilliam's *THE ADVENTURES OF BARON MUNCHAUSEN*.

At first Argento wanted only one raven featured in *OPERA*. "And I had three months to put it all together," said Stivaletti. "Then twenty days before filming started I was informed another five with limited movement capabilities would also be needed. My lab only consists of myself and Barbara Morosetti, so we were really pushed for time. The basic mechanics for the movements of the raven wings were actually used on all the bird puppets. A fulcrum in the center of the body was fixed

Raven effects supervisor Sergio Stivaletti demonstrates the oversized raven head glove puppets made for the scene where Urbano Barberini gets his eyes pecked out.



Urbano Barberini as the Inspector in *OPERA* is attacked by a raven during a performance of "MacBeth." Argento makes the birds major characters in the story.

to a motor with a central crank transmitting up and down movements to the wings."

As no animal trainer had yet been contracted by the production, Stivaletti had no access to actual ravens for study. Turned away by Rome's Zoological Museum when he asked to study their mummified specimens, Stivaletti ended up basing his design on anatomical sketches of rooks and crows, close cousins to the raven, found in a textbook. For the actual feathers, Stivaletti found a supplier in Rome whose real business was to provide plumes for the hats of the Bersaglieri, a contingent of Italy's peacetime army.

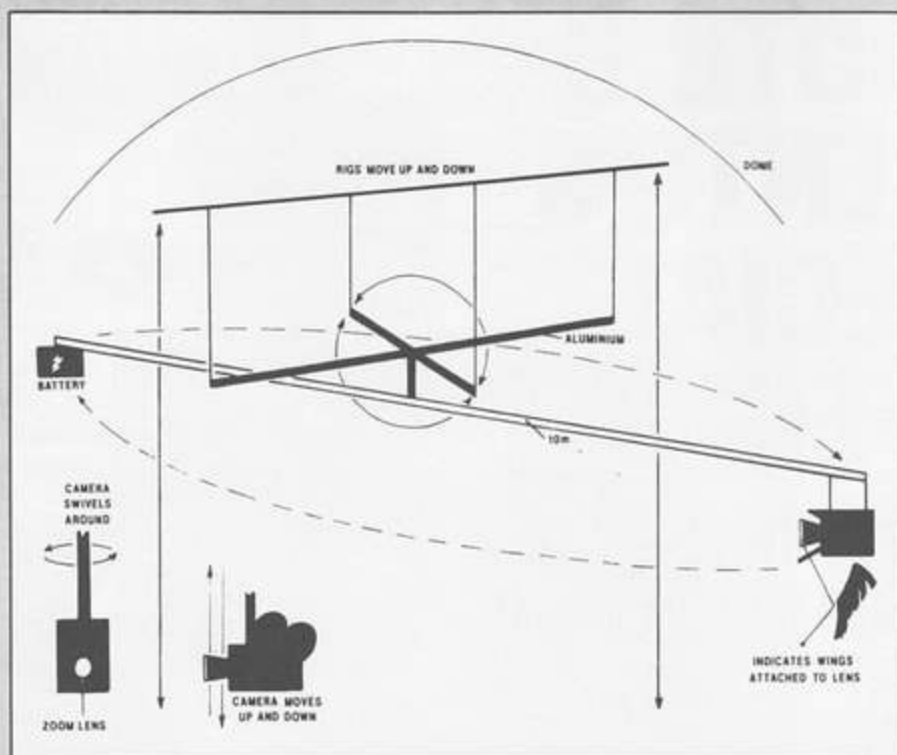
"The first complex raven I had built was specifically designed to be shot against a blue-screen and matted into the film," said Stivaletti. "It could stretch its wings when it attacked and remote controls connected to four wires on the vertebrae meant the subtlest neck movement could be achieved. The eye and beak

movements were all cable controlled as this was by far the easiest solution to the problem. But suddenly Dario didn't want that. The range of planned shots became more limited and the raven lost the purpose for which I had built it."

Back-ups were needed for the main raven which consisted of full-sized glove puppets, for the shots of Urbano Barberini's eye being pecked out, and a pair of talons, for the flight sequence on the opera house rig built by Germano Natali (see diagram next page). "A camera linked to a video system was attached to the rig," explained Stivaletti. "A pair of wings were motorized on either side to give the impression we were among a flock of ravens. Another set-up called for radio-controlled talons to be placed on a sledge-like device to give the impression of diving movements. A wide angle lens was crucial in helping the illusion as this way nobody could verify the actual scale of the oversized talons."

OPERA'S FLYING CAMERA EFFECTS

As Sky-cam had gone out of business, Argento asked Germano Natali, the man responsible for the Louma crane shot over the roof in *TENEBRAE*, to construct a rig for point-of-view raven shots integral to the plot of *OPERA*. Basically Argento asked Natali to make it possible for the camera to drop from the highest point in the dome of the Teatro Regio Opera House in Milan to 50 cm above the floor. A simple device in essence, Natali built an aluminum frame which was fitted into the opera house dome by a special effects crew that included Sergio Stivaletti. The diagram (right) shows how Natali's rig provided the camera the freedom to move in every direction—up, down, around, and zoom—in addition to the movements the rig itself could achieve—swooping, circling and perpendicular diving. Stivaletti's oversized raven wings



and talons (above) were attached to the front of the camera lens and operated by remote control as was the rig itself. The camera takes the audience on a roller-coaster ride from the top of the theatre, circles above the heads of spectators, swoops onto the stage, whirs around two of the singers as it reaches its final resting place—Opera singer Cristina Marsillach's shoulder.

One of the more unusual effects Stivaletti helped create concerned Argento's wish to let the audience be privy to the exact moment the murderer turns psychopathically schizophrenic. "Basically the camera approaches the pulsating temple of the murderer and we journey through the vein into the brain to witness the spark of madness occurring on the top of the cranium," said Stivaletti. "I sculpted the vein almost like the interior of a glass cathedral to be lit from the outside as the camera travels through the inner space. So it doesn't get confusing, like *FANTASTIC VOYAGE* where the audience never knew where they were, a shot of the brain needed to be in long focus to give the impression the point of view really is inside the skull. At a certain point blood in the veins dissolves to reveal this. I imagined the brain as a landscape with mountains and valleys as there is no realism here at all. The scene will play mostly on light and optical effects."

Another more stylistically graphic effect was the slow motion bullet shot executed by the Corridori brothers. In *FOUR FLIES ON GREY VELVET* Argento utilized a technique Antonioni had used in *ZABRISKIE POINT*. A specifically designed German

camera had been manufactured to allow a speed of 30,000 images per second and it was used in the car crash climax and for a shot of a bullet entering Michael Brandon's arm in slow-motion. Stivaletti was involved with the similar sequence in *OPERA* until the closeup and end result of a bullet entering a prosthetic head was excised at the last minute.

"Basically a man looks through a front door peephole telescope straight into a gun barrel," said Stivaletti of the cut scene. "In a point of view shot the bullet smashes the glass and enters the victim's head. Dario wanted to avoid using the ultra-high speed method of shooting again as he still has nightmares

over how much film the scene in *FOUR FLIES ON GREY VELVET* took. Instead a large pipe was built to simulate the gun barrel complete with a large glass lens and an oversized prop bullet fixed to a pulley system. The camera was placed in the pipe and filmed the bullet smashing the glass at high speed. I was supposed to build a dummy detailing the nape of the neck exploding as well. All that's left now is the bleeding face of the corpse."

Working with Argento isn't easy according to Stivaletti. "He's a perfectionist who wants the very best almost to the point of being maniacal," said Stivaletti. "In *OPERA*, because it's his most personal film, I've had great difficulty in coping with the onslaught of

non-stop ideas. He also hates when his ideas are not carried out to the letter. If anyone parts company with Dario I always think this is the main reason. If Argento's concepts are slightly changed by someone who wants to give them a more literal transcription—that's the end. I haven't been on set as much as I would have liked because of this, so I have often had to leave the raven controls to someone else. To give Dario his due though, he is open to suggestion. The only aspect of special effects he hates is stop-motion animation. I love the work of Ray Harryhausen and I did sculpt some miniature ravens for possible stop-motion background use but needless to say they aren't in the picture." □

Sergio Stivaletti demonstrates his radio controlled raven and shows its internal mechanism, built for blue screen shots which were later abandoned by Argento.



most prestigious and popular cultural events. But instead he accepted an offer to direct his first commercial for the Fiat Croma. Filmed in Australia the camera swirls in, out and around a moving car in the outback in one continuous 30 second shot and ends with a sales pitch by Argento himself. "I accepted the assignment because it enabled me to experiment with some new techniques I wanted to include in OPERA at Fiat's expense, not mine," said Argento. "I saw it as a dress rehearsal for the movie, nothing more and nothing less."

The director of photography on the Fiat commercial was Ronnie Taylor, an Englishman Argento had always wanted to work with. Taylor so impressed Argento that for the first time in his career Argento asked a non-Italian cinematographer to work on his next picture.

The most important aspect of any Argento film is the "look." In DEEP RED it was baroque verging on the neoclassic. For SUSPIRIA and INFERNO, gothic romanticism by way of Disney was the order of the day. The expressionism in TENEBRAE was stark and futuristic. And CREEPERS crystallized in Argento's mind as cold and clinical. Ronnie Taylor thinks he knows why Argento chose him for OPERA.

"Realism is the trademark key to my basic style," said Taylor. "When we talked about OPERA in the planning stages, I realized Dario didn't want to highlight the fantasy or gore elements too much or make it too far removed from the ordinary. What odd moments of fantasy there are remain authentic and don't off-balance the aims Dario has for this picture. I told Dario I liked making pictures real, not looking like they were photographed for the screen, and so far I haven't pulled any surprises that have shocked him, although reality is one thing Dario has never really gone in for."

Taylor, who won an Oscar for best cinematography in GANDHI, only has two other horror movies listed in his impressive credits—THEATRE OF BLOOD and PHAN-

“Dario Argento demands quite extraordinary techniques. The challenge is to come up with the equipment to cope with them.”

- Cinematographer Ronnie Taylor -



Daria Nicolodi (with knife) and Cristina Marsillach under seige by a maniac at the door in OPERA. Nicolodi has worked on all of Argento's films since DEEP RED.

TOM OF THE PARADISE. Otherwise his career has been strongly allied to that of director Richard Attenborough beginning with his first film OH! WHAT A LOVELY WAR and ending to date with CRY FREEDOM. In many ways it was a missed opportunity that indirectly led Taylor to accept the OPERA assignment. "After working with Brian De Palma on PHANTOM OF THE PARADISE he asked me to light DRESSED TO KILL, something I couldn't do because of conflicting schedules," said Taylor. "I've always regretted that, but working with Dario has made me realize how very similar the two directors are in many ways. Dario is an excellent filmmaker and his ideas are always inventive, conventional perhaps on one hand, but always with a twist."

Argento admitted he wanted to work with Taylor mainly because he was well versed in all the new techniques he wanted incorporated into OPERA to make it a totally new visual experience. Taylor seemed a bit non-plussed by that explanation. "I've never used Skycam before, so he can't mean that," he said quizzically.

"I suppose I'm an old hand at snorkel devices and Steadicam movement. If anything I think he means I'm used to doing all sorts of complicated work in various countries ill-equipped to handle it. Nothing ever phases me as I'll make something work using an elastic band if necessary. I think we are all proud of the raven point-of-view sequence which was efficiently carried out by the special effects boys. The rig used in the opera house was very innovative, with the camera attached to what was basically a swinging crane circling over the audience, which makes for a very believable raven attack. But that's Dario's inspiration for you. He demands quite extraordinary techniques and the challenge is to come up with the equipment to cope with it."

OPERA is being shot in the normal 2.35 anamorphic format using ordinary spherical lenses. "Basically we rob the soundtrack area and give it back at a later stage," said Taylor. "Certain shots have used 12mm lenses to be anamorphized later on 35mm which doesn't limit creativity in any way. The biggest plus, and the

reason why OPERA is the fourth picture in a row I've shot using this system, is you can put the actors right into the camera and hold the high resolution focus with a conventional lens. The minus is that you are using less of the negative—60-65%—which gives a little more grain."

As one of the few English speaking technicians on OPERA, Taylor has found working with a foreign crew less of an ordeal than he expected. "I thought I would be left out in the cold occasionally," he said. "But in reality the reverse has been the case. They are a lovely bunch of people and my time here has been a real treat. They have different ways of working which are strange, but I've grown accustomed to it. The hours are amazing and I've felt freer and much more at ease. In America and Britain, time is money. Here the lack of any monetary pressure because of Dario being who he is has meant a much more leisurely pace. Perhaps with any other Italian director it would be different. But the rapport we've established, because I've basically given him everything he's wanted, has given me a great pleasure."

Every groupie's dream come true would seem to be the career of thirty year-old Michele Soavi. "I first met Dario after he had made INFERNO," said Soavi. "I was a screenwriter/actor and I'd worked with both Lucio Fulci and Joe D'Amato. I introduced myself and asked him to read a screenplay I had been working on and we became close friends as we both like to constantly talk about movies and discuss our favorite directors like Antonioni, Polanski, and Hitchcock. After some suggestions Argento made regarding my script, I summoned up enough courage and asked if I could work with him. And when he was in pre-production with TENEBRAE, he asked me to be his second assistant to Lamberto Bava's first."

Soavi subsequently became first assistant on CREEPERS and also directed the rock video featuring Bill Wyman. A year later he assisted Bava on

DEMONS, also played the man in the metal mask distributing cinema tickets and directed the Claudio Simonetti video clip to accompany the film. After directing a documentary paean to Argento's work in *DARIO ARGENTO'S WORLD OF HORROR* for Japanese television, Soavi made his feature debut with *STAGEFRIGHT-AQUARIUS* (Italian title—*DELIRIA*) a cross between *THE BIRD WITH THE CRYSTAL PLUMAGE* and *DEMONS* which won the fledgling director many good reviews and a prize at this year's Avoriaz Fantasy Film Festival.

Argento wouldn't take the risk of financing *STAGEFRIGHT*, so Joe D'Amato sponsored it at a budget around \$500,000. Soavi acted in D'Amato's *THE GRIM REAPER*, wrote the screenplays for both *ATOR* films, and assisted D'Amato on *ENDGAME* and *A.D. TEXAS 2020*. He was also the assistant director for Lamberto Bava on *THE HOUSE WITH THE DARK STAIRCASE* and *BLAST-FIGHTER*. At present Soavi is working in the same capacity for Terry Gilliam on *THE ADVENTURES OF BARON MUNCHHAUSEN*.

"I've worked with the worst and the best," said Soavi, "and I'm only really working on *OPERA* because Dario kept firing his other assistants. He is painstakingly exact and it takes a certain type of person to put up with it. My work on the film has been to shoot the pickups—agitated raven shots, footage for use on television newscasts to bracket the action, and a long scene of the killer trying to rip Cristina's dress."

According to Soavi, the first draft of the *OPERA* script went beyond the limitations of gore which any country, apart from Japan, would have found unacceptable. "It was far too long and rather incomplete in certain areas," he said. "But this is precisely why Dario is the very best director working in Italy. He is a man who gives everything to his art, even his life. He spent two years refining the script of *OPERA* because he isn't a fake and he's a man with a mission. This driving force often leaves a few

"Dario kept firing his other assistants. He is painstakingly exact and it takes a certain type of person to put up with it."

- Assistant director Michele Soavi -



Assistant director Michele Soavi and Argento pose on the Via Monseratto location. Soavi directed the Argento-inspired horror film *STAGEFRIGHT* (see review, 118).

casualties en route but I find his commitment quite staggering. Every director wants perfection and the best from the people involved. But no one is as driven as Dario is to get his vision absolutely right. I'm not scared of him because I respect him too much and the exceptional care he has taken with *OPERA* suggests a new Argento rising from the ashes of a difficult period in his life."

One day in 1973 Argento attended a screening of the Elio Petri film *LA PROPRIETA NON E PIU UN FURTO*, a look at the '70s social and political climate of the industrial Italian middle-classes. After the screening Argento telephoned Petri and asked how he could get in touch with the actress who appeared in the film alongside Ugo Tognazzi. Her name was Dario Nicolodi and that fateful telephone call resulted in an Elizabeth Taylor/Richard Burton type relationship where everything the couple did was news. Whether it was a well-reported drug bust, the replacement of the entire Giorgio Gas-

lini score for *DEEP RED* by *Goblin*—a group Argento formed precisely for that reason, or the shouting match they had over who exactly had inspired the screenplay for *SUSPIRIA*, Argento and Nicolodi were an item. This intense relationship continued as it started, although, despite a popular misconception, they were never married. The result of their affair was a child named Asia, who appeared in *CREEPERS* and *DEMONS 2*, and the steering of Argento's work towards the gothic horrors of *SUSPIRIA* and *INFERNO*. Close friends see the steadfast refusal by Argento to complete the Three Mothers trilogy as a direct response to the breakdown of their liaison.

Nicolodi has appeared in all of Argento's work since *DEEP RED*, apart from *SUSPIRIA*, although her favorite film still remains Mario Bava's *SHOCK* (aka *BEYOND THE DOOR PART 2*). Her first major appearance came in 1970 with Francesco Rosi's *UOMINI CONTRO* and continued with *PORTRAIT OF A VEILED WOMAN* and the television series *THE LIFE OF VERDI*. Her more recent credits include

MACARONI, Lamberto Bava's *PICTURES OF GOYA* and her latest project is a screenplay she wrote with Luigi Cozzi, who will direct, called *PAGANINI HORROR* about the discovery of that composer's Mass for the Devil.

"Our relationship had simply run its course," explained Nicolodi. "*TENEBRAE* signalled the start of all our personal problems and they broke down entirely throughout *CREEPERS*. I hated making *CREEPERS* because I felt Dario was purposely trying to make me look as unattractive as possible, even going so far as insulting me in front of everyone. I suffered so much in that film because of the blur between our private and film life. The ending, which wasn't in the script [where her face is razored by a crazed chimpanzee] I'm convinced he thought up purposely to make me feel uncomfortable as it was difficult and very dangerous.

"What most critics missed in *CREEPERS* was the simple fact that Dario was saying goodbye to his past life," continued Nicolodi. "Within the context of the story, he killed me, he murdered Fiore, his daughter by his first wife, and he killed Asia who played the deformed child. The result of this has been that he has lightened up rather a lot and at least we are now friends. All the deadweight and useless things in his life have been thrown out and, just like a hot air balloon, his art has been elevated once again. *CREEPERS* disillusioned a lot of his fans. They all said his genius was finished. But what I saw in the *OPERA* script was the essence of Argento—his most purest flight of imagination. I wouldn't be in it otherwise!"

In *OPERA* Nicolodi plays the part of Myra, Betty's agent. After Vanessa Redgrave exited the production, Nicolodi had been considered for the role of the diva Mara Cecova. "Dario had told me the Cecova part was more substantial but after Vanessa left he rethought the role and eventually dropped it altogether," she said. "To make sure I was happy with Myra he gave me leeway to write my own dialogue and say what I felt about a woman's

fear of sexual harassment and attack. I now feel Myra is something more akin to a samurai warrior—my invention perhaps but a necessary addition to make the role more personal.”

Because of her strong feelings throughout the filming of both *TENEBRAE* and *CREEPERS*, Nicolodi was wary when Argento first asked her to appear in *OPERA*. “I decided to look him straight in the eye after reading the script and base my acceptance on what I saw there,” she said. “I told him what I thought was wrong with the first drafts and this action became the turning point in the tentative gradual healing of our old wounds. At first I wanted to hurt him after the way he had hurt me on the previous two films and, although I was afraid, I offered what I knew in my heart to be constructive criticism. The result, as I see it, is that *OPERA* takes Dario back to romance. *DEEP RED* was the last film he made which included any love scenes and I think this says a lot about our relationship over the years. The initial dialogue we had on *OPERA* convinced me I should join him for one last time, based on this element contained in the script.

“I love the title *OPERA*,” continued Nicolodi. “I find it a very chemical word. In all medieval books, the word has an alchemic connection as it is a maxim for experience, philosophy, and the soul. Dario is trying to put this level of alchemic conscience into the film which is why I believe it will be the greatest develop-

Daria Nicolodi plays Cristina Marsillach's agent in *OPERA*. Nicolodi, Argento's old flame, bore him a daughter, Asia, and co-wrote *SUSPIRIA* and *INFERNO*.



Argento directs Antonella Vitale, the new woman in his personal life, who becomes a victim of the killer in *OPERA*.

ment of his fantasy and being. *OPERA* revealed the ultimate sado-masochistic attitude Dario has when he makes a film. I've always been too close to notice it before. He lost weight, stopped smoking and drinking and jumped around like an acrobat on set—his total self-denial is the altar sacrifice he makes to the medium of film. Everyone tells me that Cristina Marsillach has been a problem on the film, but knowing Dario as well as I do there has to be a subtle reason for it. He has probably engineered it all. Never underestimate him because he knows exactly what he's doing at all times. You only ever find out what his actions were for when you see the finished film.”

Nicolodi's more than passing interest in magic—white, not black, she stressed—was the major reason Argento even attempted *SUSPIRIA*. And ever since *INFERNO* introduced the third mother—the Mother of Tears—everyone has waited with baited breath for the conclusion of the trilogy. “Dario cannot continue it unless we work together,” said Nicolodi. “A year ago I would have said that was impossible. Now perhaps we can do it as I have a script already written. Originally it was titled *DEI PROFUNDIIS* but now it's called *LAVERNA*, the third mother's name actually mentioned by DeQuincey. All I will say about it at present is it concerns a neurotic horror film director, the break-up of a long relationship with his lover, and their monstrous daughter who turns out to be the third mother reborn. Sound familiar? It was all the tears I've cried these past few years which gave me the idea.”

But who is the killer in *OPERA*? That will remain a closely guarded secret until the day the film is released. All the actors involved had been given different explanations to throw them off the scent in case they tried to cunningly shade their characterizations. However, the murderer dropped a few clues. “In a cheap and romantic way the killer is like a Jekyll

and Hyde character,” said the villain. “I'm a perfectly lucid human being one moment, a madman the next. I asked a psychiatrist friend of mine how a paranoid schizophrenic would act and he said that nobody really knew what twisted the mind or if anyone even knows this flaw in their makeup exists. So I'm playing it perfectly straight. I want Betty because I was in love with her mother. I killed her mother in a passionate moment, and I want the daughter to be the replacement object of my desire. Therefore she has to be forced into a state of ultimate excitement as only then will she fall in love with me.”

Not widely known is the fact that Argento always appears in every film he has ever made. Unlike Hitchcock's broad cameos, any time a closeup of a maniac's hands are needed or a killer's point-of-view shot is required, the director steps anonymously into frame. In *OPERA*, his hand is the one seen fishing with a musicstand for the key to the basement door. And this underlines the very personal theme of Argento's baroque *OPERA*—a theme crystal clear perhaps to everyone but the director himself. Audiences have already fallen in love with the ultimate excitement of his films.

Only Dario Argento needs proof. □

