



PRESS COVERAGE

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Fulfilling a Boyhood Dream of Making Gore for Fun and Profit

With body parts, slimy creatures and ghoulish effects, Todd Masters leaves his mark on films and TV shows.

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Inside his shop of horrors, not far from three naked, bloated bodies propped against the wall, Todd Masters proudly displays his latest creation: an impaled head.

For a scene in the upcoming horror flick "Snakes on a Plane," Masters and his colleagues have rigged the silicone head with a giant syringe that will pump a blood-like corn syrup mixture through the ear canal.

When a frantic woman, fleeing a crate full of deadly coral snakes, tramples on the head of a fellow passenger, her high heel pierces his eardrum.

"This is what we get into this business for," Masters says, poking his finger to show the path of the stiletto heel. "The crazier the better."

When it comes to creating gruesome physical effects — as opposed to those created on a computer screen — few have an edge on MastersFX, the company Masters founded two decades ago.

He and his employees are known in Hollywood as go-to guys for prosthetic and animatronic monsters, aliens and generalized gore.

The 39-year-old Seattle native is among a small group of physical effects artists in Los Angeles who create horror the old-fashioned way — with plaster, paint, foam and silicone.

Their numbers have dwindled over the last 15 years, falling from about 30 companies to fewer than 10 as filmmakers have relied more and more on digital effects.

The effects houses that have survived have done so by honing their techniques and finding new ways to fuse their work with computer imagery. Some filmmakers believe that physical effects bring more realism to their movies, in part because actors can interact with them.

"Actors are a lot better around the prosthetic effects," said James Gunn, director of the recently released "Slither," for which Masters created a horrific 12-foot blob-like creature and another mutant monster. "They're not looking at a blue ball on a stick, they're looking at a 'real' monster coming at



them."

Eric Roth, executive director of the Visual Effects Society, a trade group, said practical effects artists are busy.

"Five years ago there was a feeling that [computer-generated imagery] was the new toy in town and it was going to ride rough herd over everything," he said. "Today, there's a recognition that what is old is new again, and people are taking a fresh look at practical effects."

That's good for Masters, who is enjoying his busiest year ever. Company sales more than doubled to nearly \$4 million last year, with even more growth projected for 2006, Masters said.

MastersFX has created prosthetics, animatronics and makeup effects for hundreds of films, television shows and commercials, including "Tales From the Crypt" and "Nightmare on Elm Street: The Dream Child."

More recently, growth has been fueled by sci-fi dramas such as "Stargate SG-1" and "Stargate Atlantis," as well as a string of horror movies. Masters currently is creating gory effects for three other feature films, including Warner Bros.' "The Visiting," in which Nicole Kidman stars.

"We're big fans of his work," said "Snakes" director David Ellis, adding that the "awesome" stiletto-in-the-ear scene already has generated "tremendous reaction from test audiences."

MastersFX, which employs 15 to 50 people depending on the workload, is based in Arleta in the San Fernando Valley. It has a satellite office in Vancouver, Canada, to handle its growing business in that country.

"Everyone's trying to make the perfect beast," Masters said recently as he showed a reporter around his warehouse-workshop. "It uses every talent you have. You're an illustrator, you're a painter, you're a performer. In here, I can create a living, breathing thing. It's a piece of art that walks off the canvas and throttles you."

Masters' fascination with all things ghoulish began early. As a child, he would often make plaster dragons, gnomes and trolls in his mother's casserole dishes. As a 10-year-old, inspired after watching the stop-motion animation in the Ray Harryhausen classic "The 7th Voyage of Sinbad," he borrowed his father's Super 8 camera to make his first short film. It featured monster puppets.

In high school, Masters worked part-time at a Seattle visual-effects house. The job made it easy for him to play practical jokes on his buddies. He once put a severed head in a classmate's locker.

"He was probably one of the most creative kids I've had," recalls Tom Danielsen, Masters' high school graphic arts instructor. "He was unbelievably talented."



And determined. Shortly after graduating from high school, the self-taught artist moved to Los Angeles, briefly worked at another visual-effects house, and then launched his own business.

To compete against larger, more established companies, Masters refined his artistic techniques.

Traditionally, effects artists would paint directly on the face of the rubber model. Masters found that he could create a more realistic and translucent skin using multiple layers of silicone and painting veins and other effects below the surface.

He also set up his own digital animation unit to create computer models for designing his prosthetics and seeing how they fit into the sequence of a shot.

Many of his projects combine both physical and digital aspects, such as the scene in the movie "Star Trek: First Contact" in which the Borg Queen's head fuses with her body. The effect uses digital wizardry to combine actress Alice Krige's actual head with a wriggling prosthetic spine.

Masters' warehouse contains countless boxes of foam and silicone body parts. There are dismembered torsos, intestines, skulls, noses, leg stumps, human hair, even brains — leftovers from an operation scene in Stephen King's TV miniseries "Kingdom Hospital."

A medical school professor at UCLA was so impressed with the realistic-looking brains that he ordered several from Masters for use in his classroom.

Masters is perhaps best known for the dead bodies he brought to life in the hit HBO series "Six Feet Under," for which he won an Emmy Award.

His work included making four versions of a woman who had been killed when she stood up through the open sunroof of a moving limousine and slammed into a low-hanging piece of heavy equipment.

HBO spent more than \$20,000 each for the bodies, which had real nose hair and hand-painted freckles.

"Sometimes makeup artists are hired to remove blemishes," he said. "We're hired to add them."

Working with fake corpses has its occupational hazards. During the filming of the 1992 movie "The Resurrected" in British Columbia, Masters and his crew were setting up a grizzly sequence that featured dismembered body parts floating in a river.

The parts were secured by a cable, but high water from a storm ripped them free and sent them floating downstream.

"I jumped in the river and nearly drowned," Masters said. "We lost a good chunk of them but we still



managed to get the shot."

Later, an alarmed teenager snagged a missing torso while fishing. He called the police, who were relieved to discover it was one of Masters' latex replicas.

A few years earlier, Masters was returning home from the Los Angeles set of another film when he was pulled over for speeding.

When an officer shined a flashlight in the back of his van, the beam revealed two corpses.

"One cop was reaching for his gun," Masters recalled. "I had to break open one of the skulls to prove that these were fake."