

MAG – 110 – Creature Feature

[The Magnus Archives Theme - Intro]

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Rusty Quill Presents The Magnus Archives Episode One Hundred And Ten
Creature Feature

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Intro - Continues]

(Click)

MARTIN

Martin Blackwood, Archival Assistant at the Magnus Institute, recording
statement number 0121403, statement of Alexia Crawley, given March 14th,
2012.

Statement begins.

MARTIN (STATEMENT)

It's hard to put my relationship with Dexter Banks into words. It was a
complicated thing, built on well over a decade of disdain and interdependence.
In many ways I was closer to him than his wife, not that I ever touched the
odious little freak, and while those film obsessives that insist I basically
directed all his films do us both a disservice, it is true that without me he would
never have reached the fame and high regard he enjoys. Enjoyed.

Cinematographer. Such an ornate word, yet still so vague. I often wonder if
that's to blame for how overlooked we are as a profession. Or even worse, that

dry title, “Director of Photography”. But we are the true artists. A director may quite literally call the shots, but it is the cinematographer that makes them. We choose the angles, the lighting, pretty much everything you see on the screen. If the camera is a brush, then we are the hand, the arm, the eye. The director is basically just the mouth, making pointless noise while the hand does the actual work. Almost every famous director that you know with a “distinctive visual style” has simply managed to lock down a talented DOP.

I first worked with Dexter back in 1997, working as cinematographer on *Red Ronin*. It feels odd to say now, but I was genuinely excited to work with him at the time. I’d seen some of his earlier work – *Wasteland Seven*, *Dolores*, maybe a couple of shorts – and I remember thinking how refreshing it was going to be, working with a director who really got films, who was steeped in their history and drew inspiration from forgotten corners of the medium. Even some corners that should have stayed forgotten.

Unfortunately, that turned out to be the *only* thing he understood. You see, Dexter Banks lived movies. As far as I could tell, every single aspect of his life had revolved around them. His dad had owned a small cinema near Fairfax Avenue and as a teenager he’d bounced between working there and a small rental store that specialised in foreign films, specifically Italian horror movies and East Asian martial arts. I never met anyone who knew as much about films, and as little about anything else.

Working with him, it soon became clear that all he was interested in doing was recreating things he had seen. Taking scenes and music that he loved from those old obscure corners of cinema, and then constructing whatever

patchwork narrative would allow him to shoot his own versions of them. Whatever dialogue he didn't repurpose and had to write himself was stilted and slow, trying to mirror the stylisation that surrounded it, but failing utterly. I once mentioned to him the idea of working with a writer. I didn't do it again.

Red Ronin, for instance, was based on a Japanese film from the early seventies called *Blade of the Avenger*. It hit on the same dynamics and scenes as the original, but was set in modern-day Arizona, following a nihilistic ex-Marine in the fictional town of Funnel. It wasn't strictly a remake though because Dexter would constantly call me into the screening room to show me some other samurai or western that I'd never heard of, before jumping up at the appropriate scene and shouting, "That was it! We do that!" And I did.

I'm very good at my job. I've been doing it almost thirty years now, five at the BBC before crossing the Atlantic, and I know exactly what I'm doing. It turned out that I have a talent for capturing the feeling of older movies, mirroring them while still keeping the shots fresh. Who cares if it bored me to creative tears? It was exactly the sort of bull that critics love, and *Red Ronin* was the first of Dexter's films to get an Oscar nomination, though it ended up losing out to *The English Patient*. Not really surprising; it was too genre for the Academy.

I didn't realise it, but by that point I was already locked in with Dexter. I'd held some ambitions about directing myself one day, but it soon became obvious that it wasn't going to happen. Maybe if I'd got a feature under my belt before I was outed as trans it might have been different, but as it was, that revelation burned too many bridges and, when the dust settled, it was made abundantly

clear to me that I was never going to get a movie of my own, and it was either cinematography or nothing. So, I stayed.

I was in a bad place for the next couple of years, and blindly accepted the DOP positions on two more of Dexter's films, *Hell's Company* and *Leroy Slake*. Both were big hits, and by the time I properly felt myself again, I had ended up with my career so tied up in Dexter's that chasing other gigs wasn't really an option. I still have no idea how intentional it was on his part, but he was definitely aware that it was my work that elevated his films above simple homage. His periodic bouts of petty jealousy and snide bitterness had made that abundantly clear. Five years and three movies in, it was clear that we needed each other almost as much as we hated each other.

I don't know when he first mentioned his spider film. It didn't bubble out into a full obsession until two years ago, but I know he'd talked about it plenty before that. Whenever arguments over a project would last late into the night, and if he was very drunk, he'd get kind of quiet, and then he'd ask me, yet again, if I'd ever seen *Kumo Ga Tabete Iru*. I think that was the name, anyway, something like that. He was normally slurring quite badly when he said it. He thought it translated to "The Spiders that Devour", but a Japanese friend once told me it was closer to just "spiders are eating".

According to Dexter, *Kumo* was an old Tokusatsu movie which he believed had come out some time in the mid-to-late sixties. It was about a spider, just the one, despite the title, that grew to a colossal size and terrorised a small unnamed island off the coast of Kagoshima. What struck him about it, though, was the utter absence of anything resembling a hero or protagonist. No-one

fought against the monster, and although there were vignettes in the lives of those under the spider's shadow, they all ended the exact same way: with the character in question marching slowly and calmly into its waiting jaws.

Whenever Dexter described this, his eyes would widen and he'd start trying to recreate the sound that they made as they were eaten. He always claimed he wasn't doing it right, but the noises he ended up making were unsettling enough.

As far as either of us could determine, the film never existed. At least, not in any form that left a traceable record. Dexter had followed it up in a lot more detail than I had ever bothered to, and had checked with collectors of obscure film paraphernalia and long-defunct Japanese production studios. He actually showed a pretty surprising aptitude for the language, but it was just dead end after dead end. I ended up watching half a dozen different giant spider movies with him over our time together, and none of them were right. He'd just watch, muttering under his breath, "No, no, no," and chewing on the back of his thumb.

It wasn't something I ever really minded. Out of all the many and varied quirks of Dexter Banks, his minor obsession with a Japanese spider movie that may or may not have ever existed was one of the least unpleasant. At least until I got the call about his final project. He told me over the phone that he was producing a new film, that it was going to be his masterpiece. Then he started to describe it, and I don't know how much of what I felt was déjà vu and how much was just dread. I asked if he had found a copy of the film, or a script, but he just laughed. "Better," he said. "I found the book it was based on."

Then he hung up, and I was left sitting there, feeling this gnawing apprehension that I just couldn't place. I realised what had disturbed me later. It was such a small thing, but it really nagged at me. It was the idea that Dexter would ever describe a book as better than a film. That sounds like I'm insulting him, but you'd need to know him to understand: film was everything to him. Other media might as well not have existed.

Regardless, he went into production. He called it *Widow's Weave* and, while the script pages he brought were apparently based on this unnamed book of his, the shots were drawn from his memories of the first film version, assuming it existed anywhere outside his head, of course. Part of me secretly assumed Dexter had simply dreamed the movie up and this book was... I don't know. It didn't matter, not really. There wasn't any question about whether or not I was working on it. It was a Dexter Banks film, and my name was basically on the credits already.

The crew were mostly regulars he'd worked with before, but weirdly for him, he seemed to take almost no interest in casting at all. He asked Debbie Conner, our Casting Director, to get him as many no-name, untested hopefuls as the script needed. Bear in mind that at this point any A-lister would have killed to be in Dexter Banks picture, but he didn't care. For all he kept telling me about how this was his dream project, that he was electrified to finally be making, he seemed almost entirely checked out of the process of actually making it.

There was one exception to this: he claimed to be working with Neil Lagorio to make the spider. Now you might never have heard his name before, but I guarantee you you'll have seen his work. From the mid-seventies right into

CGI, Lagorio was *the* name in practical creature effects. Suit work, stop-motion, animatronics, whatever the method, he was the master. If you've watched any genre films at all from before 2005, there's basically no chance you haven't seen one of his creatures.

His early work was strictly horror, but in his prime he worked on basically any blockbuster that used practical effects for monsters or aliens. I'd had the pleasure of working with him way back in 1989 on *Orbit*, a medium budget sci-fi vehicle for some aging action star. Neil was working on a 12-foot tall animatronic robot that featured heavily in the climax. The picture was unsurprisingly a flop, but I still remember his work, how he brought a lump of wood and steel to life: the huge, intricate mechanisms allowing his crew to puppet it into motion that was so natural you could forget the back of it was completely hollow. Out of all of the odd changes to Dexter's behaviour, his excitement over working with Neil Lagorio was the one thing that I shared with him.

Not that I got a chance to do anything with that excitement. Once production started, Dexter became secretive and jumpy. He told us he'd set up a workshop for Lagorio and his team in one of the larger empty spaces on the lot, but no-one except him was to go inside or make any contact with the practical effects department. It was odd, but everyone knew better than to argue. Once Dexter had an idea in his head, he would throw you off the set for trying to change it. When it really needed to happen, people generally looked to me to do so, since I was the one they considered unfireable. And this time, I did, saying that I'd worked with Neil before and would love a chance to catch up with him. Dexter curtly explained that Neil had become reclusive in his

retirement, and had only agreed to work on this picture on condition of absolute privacy. I didn't push the issue. It didn't seem like the battle to waste my energy on.

And there were certainly plenty more battles once shooting began. If you're wondering how easy it is to recreate shots that only exist in the hazy memory of an eccentric, or to frame scenes when you only get the typo-riddled script the morning before, I can tell you: not easy. Not easy at all. And Dexter's constant outbursts didn't help, throwing people off set for the smallest imagined offences, or throwing away a whole day's shoot because it "just didn't feel right". We were burning through money and good will faster than I had ever seen, even on the most slapdash of his earlier projects.

The cast really impressed me, though. Most of them were fresh out of drama school, with maybe a couple of ads under their belt, and a few older faces who'd clearly spent most of their lives hurling themselves at closed doors until now. Most impressive to me though, was a guy called Brandon Olmar. He was playing the closest thing the film had to a protagonist: a homeless ex-Methodist minister who'd found himself on the island by chance and served as a connecting thread, wandering between the scenes and the vignettes of the inhabitants after each ended with their march to the spider.

Brandon took to the role immediately, with a gravity and a weariness that I don't think could have been entirely feigned. He was the only one who didn't seem excited by the movie, and spent his off hours smoking and reading quietly in one of the trailers. It was a shame because for whatever reason he also seemed to be the only one that Dexter would listen to. I only saw them

talking once or twice, but every time Dexter would be rapt, nodding at whatever Brandon might have to say.

Of course, I never really had time to think on it. I was finding it an almost impossible task to get even the most basic of shots, with Dexter constantly demanding the whole set-up be changed for no reason. Like I said, I'm excellent at my job, but giving him what he wanted from the camerawork relied on him actually knowing it himself. There was a frenzied, nervous energy to his instructions and, if I didn't know any better, I might have even said that he wasn't just afraid the shots might not work, he was afraid of the idea.

And so it was for the first few weeks. Dexter clearly wasn't sleeping. He had insisted on using old equipment and avoided digital almost entirely, to the point where several of the crew were using pieces of kit they'd never even seen before. This meant that a workprint had to be made manually for the dailies, something he refused to let anyone else do. Once shooting wrapped he'd be in the editing room for hours "preparing dailies", although they shouldn't have needed editing at all. And when we watched them, I'd often notice that certain shots were missing, stuff I was certain that we'd filmed. I brought this up with him once, and he called me a liar to my face.

I only interrupted him when he was preparing dailies once. An actress who was slated to be shooting the next day had taken violently ill and the crew needed his sign-off to change the schedule. No-one else dared to go in, so once again it was down to me to head into that tiny room alone.

It was dark inside, lit only by what spilled in through the open doorway. I could hear a sound like the turning of an old film reel, but I couldn't say where from. I stood there, unable to step inside, not because of fear, but because the space inside was threaded all over with film strips. Up and down, one side to the other, wrapping around and through each other. I gingerly reached out and touched one and, as I did, Dexter seemed to emerge from the darkness. At first, I thought he was taller than usual, but then I realised that he was suspended, ever so slightly, by the strips of film, his feet a good couple of inches off the floor. He was very calm as he asked what I wanted, and when I stutteringly explained the situation, he just nodded and said we should feel free to rearrange however we liked. Then he closed the door and I left, trying very hard to convince myself that he had only had two arms.

Shooting continued, but there was a growing awareness throughout the crew that we had still seen nothing from Neil Lagorio. Nobody had met him on set or spotted him or his team entering or leaving the workshop where the spider was supposedly being constructed. No-one had heard the sound of work being done in there, and the rumour was that Dexter had finally lost it and the workshop was empty. We had run through all the scenes that could be done without it, and everyone was getting really impatient.

Finally, Dexter announced it was time for the unveiling, for the spider, for Kumo to make its appearance. We were all excited as we assembled outside the workshop, but there was a nervous energy in the air that day. It was about as cold as it ever gets in LA, but the shiver that passed through us when he told us it was time was something else entirely.

Dexter told us the actors would see it first. He gave no reasoning for this, and silenced the outcry from a couple of the crew with a vicious glare. He then gathered up the cast and, with Brandon leading them, took them through a small door in the side of the workshop, and they disappeared inside.

I've thought back over those minutes so many times, trying to decide if I'd heard or seen anything that might have explained what happened inside that building, but in the end, I have to admit that I didn't. Minutes passed, then half an hour, as we waited impatiently for Dexter or the others to return.

It seems like a sick cosmic joke that that was the day the press broke the news of Neil Lagorio's death. Half an hour after the cast walked into that building, one of the grips stumbled across the news story whilst idly checking his phone. Lagorio had been privately suffering from Parkinson's for almost a decade and had been bedridden in his Connecticut home for the last year. We knew then that whatever was going on inside that building, it was not Neil Lagorio debuting a new animatronic creation. Once again, all eyes turned to me.

I'm still not entirely sure what I saw on the other side of that door. I probably saw nothing, like the cops who arrived shortly afterwards. The place was entirely empty, after all, just as the rumours had always said. But I wouldn't be here, talking to you, if I thought that was true, now would I? Because I remember that first moment, that instant of looking up when I first entered. I saw it, perfectly interwoven, with a hundred cocoons writhing and dangling, stretching out far above me. And in its centre, those black and shining eyes that focused on my entrance, the legs that worked so fast as to be a blur, the

fangs that dripped their poison onto Dexter Banks. Then in a moment it was all gone, scuttling up and into nowhere, pulling its impossible web behind it.

I never knew how to describe my relationship with Dexter, and I still don't. How he was complicit, and how much he was simply caught in his own neuroses and fears, I don't know. I know he didn't deserve what happened to him.

I found the book, by the way, and I burned it. If I ever track down the man who used to own it, I might just burn him too.

Statement ends.

MARTIN

I think Alexia might be a bit too late for that. I mean, I think it sounds like a Jurgen Leitner book. About spiders. Huh. Glad John didn't have to read this one anyway; I know he's not a fan. Although this one wasn't too bad, actually, I—
Ah, anyway.

This is, I suppose, one explanation for the disappearance of Dexter Banks, along with almost a hundred cast members, back in 2012. There's not a lot I can really add that hasn't already been dissected by a hundred different tabloids, magazines and mystery shows. Even the, um, arachnid angle has been covered, as it seems that when we weren't a lot of help, Alexia Crawley told her full story to the press. She was not treated kindly and refuses to discuss the events any further. Poor thing.

Ah, but Basira did manage to get hold of a few things from recent LAPD files that haven't been released to the public yet, though she's a bit cagey as to how she got them. Apparently, over the last five years, every February, a corpse is found washed up on Redondo Beach. It'll be a shrivelled husk, with all moisture and internal organs apparently removed. These corpses are usually unidentifiable, but the one that washed up last year was confirmed to be Chadwick Fraiser – an aspiring actor who went missing in 2012, and whose IMDB page lists a final credit for *Widow's Weave*.

Um, that's it.

(Click)

(Click)

MARTIN

That doesn't make sense; can he even do that?

BASIRA

I don't know, I guess so?

MARTIN

I mean, so what, he can just reach into your head and put something in there?

BASIRA

I don't know. I guess so.

MARTIN

I mean, does it even have to be a true thing? Do, do we know for sure he's not lying, like, like, magically lying?

BASIRA

I. Don't. Know.

MARTIN

R-right, sorry. I'm just... It's a lot to take in, you know?

BASIRA

(Sharply) Mostly for Melanie, yeah.

MARTIN

Oh, of course, yes. Sorry.

BASIRA

Look, I'm not the one you need— [Sighing] We can't just ignore it.

MARTIN

Well yeah, but what do we— We didn't even know that was something he could do. What if there's other stuff he could do to us?

BASIRA

We are not letting him get away with it.

MARTIN

I didn't say that.

BASIRA

Look, Martin, I know you care. I know you do. But caring isn't enough. You can't just stand next to someone with a cup of tea and hope everything's going to be alright.

MARTIN

That's not fair. You don't even know me.

BASIRA

Prove it. We need to do something, because if we just let him—

MARTIN

Oh! Hi, hey, hey Melanie. I, I— Can I get you a... cup of tea?

MELANIE

So she told you, then.

BASIRA

We need everyone if we're going to have any chance.

MELANIE

Right.

MARTIN

What about Tim?

BASIRA

Tim is... Elias is watching him too closely.

MELANIE

He's probably watching me too.

MARTIN

We could try the tunnels. John says they might help?

MELANIE

Right.

BASIRA

Or maybe when he's not paying attention, distracted, like during your, um, 'performance review'?

MELANIE

Wait, what do you mean?

MARTIN

Yeah, what?

BASIRA

Well, I was heading out, and Martin, you remember you knocked over that huge stack of papers?

MARTIN

They shouldn't have been there in the first place! Besides, I cleaned them up.

BASIRA

But not in the right order. And when I brought them up to Elias yesterday, he asked why they were messed up.

MARTIN

(Slightly alarmed) Y-you didn't tell him it was me?

BASIRA

Not the point, Martin. The point is—

MELANIE

He wasn't watching you. He was busy.

BASIRA

Yeah.

MARTIN

Hang on...

BASIRA

Not here. The tunnels.

MARTIN

Right, right, right.

(Slightly distant and echoey) Melanie, I'm, I'm really that... I'm just sorry.

MELANIE

Yeah.

(Click)

[The Magnus Archives Theme - Outro]

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Today's episode was written by Jonathan Sims and directed by Alexander J Newall.

It featured: Alexander J Newall as Martin Blackwood, Frank Voss as Basira Hussain and Lydia Nicholas as Melanie King.