

## B-horror crew will kill for an A

25 students and a legendary luchador collide on set

By **KELSEY WHIPPLE**

March 05, 2009

Five minutes and 37 seconds into a conversation with Aaron Crozier, it's already apparent that he's two months into a project that no amount of hand gestures can explain. Even though Crozier has both his hands and mouth moving, the St. Louis filmmaker's next movie still sounds like a riddle: What has one zombie Aztec chief, 25 college students, a handful of flamethrowers and a masked Mexican wrestler? Stop us if you've heard this one before.

The answer is as unexpected as Crozier, a 29-year-old with a messy beard and black beanie that liken him to a younger Philip Seymour Hoffman. *Venganza Azteca* (Aztec Vengeance) will become one of three B-horror movies shot on MU's campus since 2005. It's the third in an offbeat franchise started by Jeffrey Uhlmann, an associate professor of computer science at MU and, in this case, a B-horror movie writer. The franchise's films, which also include *Mil Mascaras vs. The Aztec Mummy* and *Academy of Doom*, share a star, luchador (Mexican wrestler) Mil Mascaras, and no small amount of horror tropes. Mascaras is one of the three most famous luchadores.

"The plot of the movie is a break-in at a university where somebody steals a bunch of Aztec artifacts from a professor's storage room and [the university brings] in Mil Mascaras just to be on the safe side," Crozier says. Somehow, his face stays straight throughout his telling of this kid-you-not plot. "It's a good thing they do because it turns out one of the items they stole is a disembodied Aztec chief's head, and it ends up hypnotizing the students who did the prank and causing general chaos throughout campus. Mil comes in and saves the day."

Although this is the third time Mascaras will save the day in this franchise, it is the first full-length film that Spielberg stand-in Crozier has directed. Crozier's past credits include work on Nelly's "Air Force Ones" music video and time as a field production assistant on Kimora Lee Simmons' reality show *Life in the Fab Lane*, but this is his



Crozier works with an actor at a casting call for *Venganza Azteca*. The auditions were held at MU and were open to all.

first experience as both the director of a full-length film and as an instructor. Crozier's 25 students in an MU film production class will be Venganza's crew. Marcus Smith, MU student and casting director for Venganza, says Crozier's class offers invaluable experience. "A class like this, where we get to have hands-on experience, where we get to have our opinions considered, nothing like this existed here before," Smith says. "Every person in the class will get little butterflies when they see their names scroll up on the screen later on."

Although Venganza has both cast and crew, that's where the similarities between the movie and anything playing at local theaters end.

"In a lot of films, you have the villain who is an interesting monster, but then you have the protagonist who is a love interest, and that's just downtime," Uhlmann explains. "He likes her, she likes him, but when is the monster going to be onscreen again? The thing about a lucha film is that either there's a monster or there's the hero in a mask. There's no boring time. In the script, you just say, 'Possessed sorority girls? It'll fit somewhere.'"

Together, Uhlmann and Mascaras have made memories funnier than most computer science professors can boast. Uhlmann recalls when Mascaras put his luchador costumes in a car he thought was his own. "The trunk opened; he puts his things in," Uhlmann says. "I'm waiting for him to open the door for me, and he looks over to me and says, 'Jeffrey, this is not my car.' We're supposed to be filming in 30 minutes, and his clothes are now in this stranger's car."

Starting in April, the students on the film crew will see more spandex by noon than Mickey Rourke did making his comeback. Venganza Azteca might be a franchise builder for Uhlmann, but he hones in on education as his motivation. Students of various majors will work on the film, which the MU Provost is sponsoring. The project is intended to promote entrepreneurial studies. "Blowing up cars, firing flamethrowers, being in battles with masked Mexican wrestlers — it's hard to beat that for diversity of experience," Uhlmann says.