

From the book *CONFESSIONS OF A PUPPETMASTER: A Hollywood Memoir of Ghouls, Guts, and Gonzo Filmmaking*, by Charles Band with Adam Felber. Copyright © 2021 by Charles Band. From William Morrow/HarperCollins *Publishers*. Reprinted by permission.

Chapter 9 (1989-1991)

I don't remember exactly how I hooked up with Paramount Pictures, but it was an easy, comfortable fit: I had a track record, and they were putting a lot of money into a business that to me was obviously the future of entertainment: Home video. Direct-to-video home video. Why lose money in theatrical releases? All I really needed was great distribution, advertising, and prime placement on the video shelves. Universal had all that stuff in place, and I had some ideas as to how they could do it better.

At the time, Paramount's home entertainment division was run by a man named Jim Gianopulos, A young, energetic guy almost exactly my age, we hit it off immediately. With his encouragement, I finished the properties I'd walked out of Empire with, and I distributed them through Paramount. Those movies did great, and suddenly I was the entire division's darling. I immediately used that goodwill to pitch them a sweeping vision for my new venture. I'll get to that in a minute, but one of those first couple of movies is worth mentioning first.

"Cannibal Women in the Avocado Jungle of Death" was a hoot all the way through. Written and directed by an immensely talented young dude, J.F. Lawton, it's a fantastic piece of satire — kind of a loving send-up of B movies while absolutely *being* a B movie, and playing with all the tropes of sexism and feminism and commercialism that were dominating our culture back then (and still are!).

The cast was amazing, too. It featured Shannon Tweed, the former Playmate of the Year, who you may know as as the partner of Gene Simmons, the frontman for KISS. They were already

inseparable back then. We also had Adrian Barbeau, whom you may know as Rizzo from the Broadway cast of *Grease* or from the TV show *Maude*, or the movie *Escape From New York*, but whom I also knew as the former Mrs. John Carpenter.

To round out the cast we needed a scoundrel, a guy who could exude some of that Harrison Ford energy and also really land a joke. J.F. and I both knew who it had to be — a comedian I'd seen at The Improv who seemed to have all the right tools. His name was Bill Maher.

The movie did really well, and it's still a lot of fun to see today. And despite its somewhat adult themes, it was rated a family-friendly PG-13, which I think earns me the distinction of being the only producer in the 1980s to have Shannon Tweed keep her clothes on. Which, for that era, was just about the most perverse thing you could do!

Right as we were wrapping *Cannibal Women*, J.F. Lawton offered me another script he'd just written. It was a dark, kind of sleazy tale of a Hollywood hooker trying and failing to pull herself out her sad, impoverished existence. It was good, but it obviously wasn't my kind of thing. It was too dark to be a sex comedy, and it was conspicuously devoid of monsters, time travelers, and murderous toys. I thanked J.F. and passed on it.

J.F. did find a home for that script, though. He got it to Garry Marshall, who immediately demanded that J.F. make it lighter, funnier, and give it a fairytale ending. Well, *that* worked, and soon J.F. was receiving applause, large royalty checks, and a WGA Award for Best Screenplay, for *Pretty Woman*.

After those first few properties did so well for Paramount, I was their new Golden Boy of home video. It wasn't just my movies they liked — they liked my patter, my spiels, the way I truly

understood how to approach the exploding home market. And I didn't waste any time — within a few months I asked Jim Gianopulos to assemble the crew so I could pitch my vision for the next Charlie Band company.

They assembled on the Paramount lot in one of those big conference rooms, and I came in with drawings, posters, paraphernalia. I wanted to project the image of a company that was already in full-flower; all they had to do was jump on board. Of course, at the time I just had a few ideas and some really cool artwork, one piece of which was a sketch of a steamer trunk full of extremely evil-looking puppets...

After a little glad-handing and kidding around, I took over the room and hit 'em with my pitch. "Guys," I said, "It's called Full Moon Features. And I want it to be the Marvel Comics of the 90s."

One thing I never lacked was ambition.

A decade or so later, of course, Marvel would become the absolute biggest name in blockbuster movies. But this was 1989. I was talking about the Marvel Comics of my childhood. I used to spend hours of those golden Roman afternoons poring over my Marvel comics. I loved the characters, of course, and their wild storylines. But I also loved the world they created. Marvel heroes and villains would cross over from one book to the next, show up in each other's storylines, be part of giant events that would span multiple titles. And I loved the degree of what we now call "transparency." Marvel had a real relationship with its readers, they responded to fan letters in every issue. And there, at the end of every book, you could find "Stan's Soapbox," where the great Stan Lee would write about the process, his writers and artists, or just spout off about the real issues of the day, like the Vietnam War or racism. Marvel gave you an entire universe to live in.

That's what I pitched to Paramount that afternoon. Full Moon would be more than a studio. More than a brand. We'd be a universe unto itself: A vast, creepy, sci-fi-and-horror universe of interlocking franchises where fans could either dip in for occasional stories or immerse themselves in the world. Crossovers. Multiple sequels. A video magazine at the end of each VHS tape, *my* "Stan's Soapbox," where I could talk to fans and let them look behind the scenes, a feature I called the "Full Moon Video Zone." To make it dependable and fan friendly, I set up the implausible goal of releasing a new movie every 30 days!

I literally worked up a sweat spinning this elaborate vision to the guys, then calmed myself down and paused, giving them a chance to react.

They went bananas. Full Moon was born.

For my first Full Moon movie, Jim Gianopulos gave me something I pretty much never got from a studio, before or since: A fair deal. Rather than giving me money up front and leveraging that to own a bigger piece of my property, I would fund the movie myself and get a fair share of its receipts. Plus, I'd retain the rights to my movies — I wasn't going to get "Empired" again.

A good deal was essential, because I knew what movie we'd start with. It was an idea I'd been playing with for a long time. I pitched it to the Paramount gang with that sketch I'd commissioned, an old steamer trunk, opened, revealing a menagerie of puppets:

Puppet Master marked the birth of Full Moon—and the rebirth of my career as well. They could take Empire from me, but I still had my friends, my collaborators, my family. I got the band back together. The Band band. David Schmoeller directed. My brother Richard wrote a beautiful, haunting orchestral score. Dave Allen signed on to do all the stop motion animation it would take to bring those nefarious puppets to life.

By this point I was completely over the idea of getting “name” actors to bring in an audience. That seemed like old-school thinking. If you were in the video store and you wanted to see a movie about killer dolls, the presence of some old star from the 70s wasn’t going to affect your decision. But I did want someone special for the beginning of *Puppet Master*, someone to add some gravitas to the part of the old, World War II-era puppet-maker Andre Toulon. And for that I found Bill Hickey. Bill had recently been nominated for an Academy Award for playing the withered old don in *Prizzi’s Honor* with Jack Nicholson and Anjelica Huston. But although he was withered, he was far from old — he suffered from some kind of medical condition that made him look much older than his 50-something years. He was perfect as Toulon.

As important as the movie itself, though, was the way it would be released. I had a plan. It involved making sure that all of America’s video stores had reason to feature our release, give it prime placement, put up some posters, etc. And the only way to make that happen was to get Paramount’s marketing guys excited.

Remember how I said that my Full Moon movies never screened theatrically? That was a little bit of a lie. The movies were shot on 35mm film, and they all *did* have screenings. *One* screening, on the Paramount lot. I made sure it was a real event, with the Paramount team as the guests of honor. At that first one I had the legendary Forest Ackerman on hand, the man who essentially created sci-fi fandom, editor and writer of *Famous Monsters of Filmland*, a pre-*Fangoria* bible for anyone who followed *my* kind of movies. The whole event was done up Hollywood movie-premiere style, and then we watched *Puppet Master* in one of Paramount’s screening rooms.

It blew the marketing guys away. They were just the allies I needed to make this film big. This might sound like minor detail, but listen: When video store owners opened their packages

from the studios each month, those packages came jam-packed with Stuff. Swag. Display materials. Dolls, tchotchkes, cardboard stand-ups, and a big catalogue describing the movies on the tapes within. The packaging of these materials was key, and my Paramount marketing guys made sure Full Moon movies looked slick and legitimate. I was a B moviemaker, sure, but those Full Moon releases became what I called “counterfeit A movies,” getting themselves right up there on the shelf with the big theatrical hits. The idea was that the placement – along with the right promotional campaign — would make my movies feel like big budget A movies that you somehow happened to have missed when they were in the theater.

It worked. To this day, I have fans come up to me and say, “Man, I loved *Puppet Master*. My mom wouldn’t let me see it in the theater, but me and my friends rented it...”

I usually don’t correct them. Why destroy an illusion I worked so hard to create?

It couldn’t have gone better. *Puppet Master* wound up being one of the biggest hits of the year, and because of my deal with Jim Gianopulos, I finally got to see a real share of the profits. That movie made me several million dollars.

A year after Empire had been wiped off the map, I was back on it!