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NO ESCAPING THE CLUTCHES OF A CULT FILM

BYLINE: By JOHN M. GLIONNA, TIMES STAFF WRITER

BODY:

In a dozen years as a newspaper reporter, I have asked for only two autographs. One of them was from my childhood idol, pool player Steve Mizerak.

The other was from Becky.

You know -- Becky, the ex-topless dancer in the cult classic "Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer." In the end of the movie, she gets hacked to pieces, her dismembered body abandoned inside a baby-blue suitcase.

I first saw "Henry" four years ago as a Sunday matinee. During this inauspicious film, based on the lives of self-professed serial killers Henry Lee Lucas and Otis Toole, the not-so-dynamic duo kills 15 people.

In the dark-souled spirit of "Taxi Driver" and "Reservoir Dogs," the movie takes a sinister, unabashed look at violence in America, featuring a disturbing home invasion scene and others in which Henry -- the epitome of the urban bogymen -- snaps necks, wields a screwdriver and decapitates a dead victim with a kitchen knife.

When it was over, I needed instant therapy. I wanted to grab people by the collar as they filed to their cars and plead: "My God! How can we let people do this to one another?"

The movie's grip on me eventually wore off. (Although my wife still lives in fear, always locking the door, proclaiming, "Henry's out there.")
Then came the recent day at Hampton's in Hollywood. That's when I saw her: ^{we should send her} ~~scare~~ ^{her!} ~~scare~~ ^{her!} She set down my french fries and asked innocently if I wanted another Coke.

The glint of recognition slammed my cortex like some bad acid flashback. It was the same blond hair, that same petite frame and those sky-blue eyes. No, it couldn't be. Becky was my waitress!

I swallowed hard and asked the question that scores of "Henry" cult followers have asked before me: "Ahem. You're Becky, aren't you?"

She smiled sweetly and nodded her head. But when I recited a few favorite lines from the film, Tracy Arnold looked at me and said, "Oh, you even remember dialogue. That scares me!"

* Although I hear white chicks out in LA. really like black dude

Los Angeles Times, May 19, 1994

Then Arnold told her own scary story: how she'd been taken hostage by a movie.

*

Nine years ago, then barely 22, the stage actress went "from Shakespeare to shock" -- landing her first film role in the low-budget "Henry," filmed in Chicago in just four weeks for \$100,000.

Paid \$2,000 along with two other first-time film actors, Arnold played Otis' innocent kid sister who misguidedly falls in love with the brooding Henry and later falls to pieces as the movie's pitiful last victim.

Arnold thought she had scored big-time with her first movie role. After all, she knew a lot about the real Henry Lee Lucas. Some of his supposed Texas victims were friends of her family. And Lucas -- now on Death Row -- spent time in jail near her hometown of Georgetown, Tex. *(she could be the love child of Sheriff Poutwell and Bob Prince)*

"Henry," filmed in 1985, was shelved for five years after receiving an X rating for violence. But the film rose from the dead after critic Roger Ebert gave it a rave review at the 1990 Telluride (Colo.) Film Festival. *The Fat Guy - he'd probably trust Charles Duncan the first time he met him, too*

Since then, "Henry" has inspired a following of zealous fans who are either still losing sleep over the film or have now memorized Henry's deadpan lines during repeat viewings. I have friends -- grown men with sadistic streaks -- who still cannot bear to watch it. Still, the home video version even advertises "Henry" T-shirts and movie posters.

For co-stars Michael Rooker, who played Henry, and Tom Towles -- who portrayed Otis -- the movie's unlikely success translated into steady work: Rooker's resume includes roles in "JFK," "Sea of Love," and "Mississippi Burning," while Towles has scored regular film and television work.

*

But for Arnold, the film's success has spelled only frustration. And the public recognition she attributes to "my own little 15 minutes of fame."

By the time "Henry" hit the midnight market in 1990, Arnold had moved from Chicago to Hollywood to begin waitressing. She landed a few minor roles, including commercials for both McDonald's and Wendy's. Soon, though, the work disappeared. And the Becky sightings began.

"Nobody ever just says 'Oh, you were in that little film,' " Arnold said. "It's always 'Oh, my God! It's you! You're Becky!' It's no small thing."

The sightings actually started before the film was commercially released -- among Hollywood insiders with access to bootleg copies of "Henry."

"The first time I was recognized, this guy just stared at me like I was a ghost," Arnold said. "When he finally approached me, I said, 'How did you find me? How did you get a copy of the film?' He just gave me a wicked little smile and said, 'Oh, it's around.' "

Los Angeles Times, May 19, 1994

Since then, she has endured jokes among friends -- including the one that she'd make a great spokeswoman for American Tourister luggage. Once, Arnold was followed for several blocks by a grungy-looking character she believed was going to rob her.

"I thought, 'Oh, am I in trouble.' Then he walks up to me and says, 'Dude! You were in Henry! You were, like, so great!' "

But casting directors have been less than complimentary.

"It's like, these people can't see me as anybody else but Becky," Arnold said. "They all hear me read for roles and they say, 'Gee, you were great. We just don't know what to do with you.' "

*

Arnold's parents back in Texas can't bear to watch "Henry."

"I preferred to see Tracy in some sort of Cinderella-type movie," said Wayne (Pistol) Arnold. "I kept in mind that it was just a movie. After it was over, I told her 'Well, honey, at least you didn't take your clothes off.' We were pleased at that, at least."

Added mother Jean Arnold: "We're strict Southern Baptists and we don't even like to hear swear words. But it could have been worse. It could have been a porno movie. Women do those kind of films, you know."

"Henry" is still a topic of conversation in the Arnold family.

"A few years ago, my mother chided me for having an unlisted number -- which is unheard-of in rural Texas," Arnold said. "She wanted to know how people were going to get in touch with me. I said 'Mom, I have a movie out about a serial killer. I don't want people to get in touch with me.' "

Now Arnold works three part-time jobs as she waits for mainstream Hollywood to come calling -- while trying to erase the black footnote a strange little movie has left on her career. (She has a role in "The Shot," an upcoming independent film; she plays a savvy Hollywood reporter.)

Meanwhile, she makes the most out of her 15 minutes of movie fame. Like when I asked for an autograph for my wife.

"Betty," Arnold wrote, "I've made a deal with Henry and he's agreed to leave you alone. But I may come knocking."

That Tracy Arnold, she just slays me.

GRAPHIC: Photo, COLOR, Tracy Arnold won her 15 minutes of fame as Becky in "Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer." TAMMY LECHNER / Los Angeles Times

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH

LOAD-DATE-MDC: May 20, 1994

*You ought to have your
publicist call this reporter
in a couple of weeks after
you reveal the Real Becky!*

JB