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Mil Mascaras: Resurrection

Directors: Chip Gubera and 'Andrew Quint'

Writer: Jeffrey Uhlmann

Producers: Jeffrey Uhlmann, Kannappan Palaniappan

Cast: Mil Mascaras, Willard Pugh, Richard Lynch

Country: USA

Year of release: 2008

Reviewed from: screener

Website: www.mmvsam.com

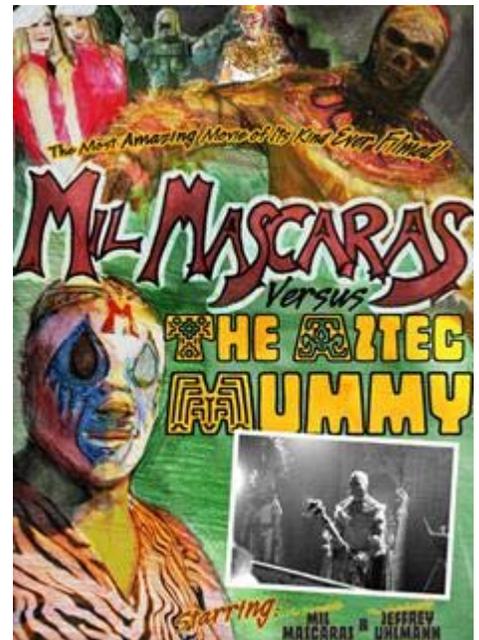
Stick with me on this one because it's going to take a little while to get to the point.

When I was a young man - in fact I think I was still at school - I bought a budget-price LP called *The Very Best of the Bonzo Dog Doo Dah Band*. I had probably heard one or two Bonzo songs and I knew of their connection with Monty Python but I really didn't know what I was letting myself in for when I first put the stylus on that record.

Those of you who are familiar with the Bonzos will, I am sure, realise the effect that 40 minutes of the band's best songs had on me. Those of you who don't know the Bonzos, well, you are missing out on one of life's great pleasures. This was a band, who released a few albums in the late 1960s, early 1970s and had one solitary top ten hit (produced by Paul McCartney under a pseudonym) and who have a very strong claim to being the greatest comedy music act of all time. They weren't parodists like Alan Sherman or ['Weird Al' Yankovic](#), they weren't satirists like Stan Freberg or Flanders and Swann. Probably the closest comparison would be Spike Jones and his City Slickers, in terms of their free-form, take-no-prisoners approach to lunacy. Except that the Bonzos were art school graduates, steeped in admiration for the surrealist school (in fact their original name was the Bonzo Dog Dada Band but they got fed up having to explain to people what dadaism was) and reacting against not only 1960s pop and rock but also, during their brief existence, the oddity that was the 1960s trad jazz revival.

Look, if you don't know anything about the Bonzos, just go and buy, borrow, download, whatever some of their songs and I hope you will realise just why they are so special.

I bought a couple of their original LPs, I bought the complete collection on CD when it was released, I got excited every time I saw a clip of them on TV, invariably one of their appearances on semi-lost proto-Python quasi-kidfare *Do Not Adjust Your Set*, I even saw solo gigs by two of the ex-members. But there was something missing and it was this: the Bonzos were, by all accounts,



an amazing live act. But there was no actual record of this beyond hearsay and contemporary reviews. No recording existed of them actually performing, apart from the *DNAYS* clips and their legendary cameo in *Magical Mystery Tour*, neither of which really captured them in a live setting.

Then in 2006, twenty years after I bought that LP, something amazing happened. The Bonzos reunited. They did some Christmas shows in London with some of today's biggest comedians handling vocals in lieu of the sadly missed Viv Stanshall. And then - they went on tour! All the original members (bar the two dead ones), in their sixties or seventies (or eighties in one case) with Phill Jupitus and Ade Edmondson sharing vocals. It was a real live Bonzos show - and it came to Leicester. *It came to my town.*



I was able to go to my local concert hall and see the Bonzo Dog Doo Dah Band performing live, not just trotting through a few old tunes but having a whale of a time indulging in all the old lunacy: the robots and the costumes and the props and the head ballet and music for the leg and, ooh, everything. All this happened, right there, more than thirty years after everyone thought it had ceased for ever. Holy freaking cow. Even now I can't get over this.

It was the pop culture equivalent of finding a coelacanth in your fishing net.

Well now, here's another coelacanth. *Mil Mascaras: Resurrection* is an honest-to-goodness brand new lucha libre movie starring the actual Mil Mascaras and pitting him against the most iconic monster ever to emerge from the Mexican film industry - the Aztec Mummy.

I can't claim to be anywhere near as familiar with Mexican wrestling films as I am with the Bonzos but I've seen a few, in fact I've seen enough to know that this is spot-on. The plot, the dialogue, the characters, the wrestling matches: everything is archetypal. And yet this is not some cheesy spoof or even a sincere homage, it actually is a genuine lucha libre film (starring a genuine lucha libre film star). The production values are bang up-to-date and the picture was actually made by Americans in the United States yet the 'feel' is pure 1960s south-of-the-border grapplefest. And part of that is a casual acceptance on the part of every single character that the portly fellow in the gaudy mask - whose name is pronounced MAS-caras, not like the make-up - is a real-life superhero, an inarguably noble, valiant force for good. "You are the most respected man in the world," somebody tells him at one point.

'Mil' is called in by the never-named black, bespectacled Police Chief (Willard Pugh: *Puppet Master 5*, *RoboCop 2*, *The Guyver* and Brian Yuzna's *Progeny*) to help solve a puzzling series of crimes: seven blood banks have been robbed of blood on seven consecutive nights. Mil points out that all seven nights had a full Moon (yes, it's that old B-movie staple, the full Moon that lasts a week). "Vampires?" queries the Chief. "No," responds Mil, "just someone who can't see very well in the dark."

Using a female-voiced computer (which, apart from this one scene, is never seen, heard or mentioned again) Mil brilliantly deduces where the next robbery will take place - because there are only eight blood banks in Mexico City.



You can see that already we are into some seriously loopy plotting but the fabulous thing here, which gives the movie its verisimilitude, is that the whole thing is played completely straight. *Mil Mascaras: Resurrection* is absolutely serious in every respect - which is why it is so deliriously, knowingly, hilarious, deliberately entertaining. In fact our introduction to MM has him eating dinner in a posh restaurant where his fiancée (Stephanie Matthews) gently dumps him. "I don't really know you at all," she laments. "Is it because you have never seen me without my mask?" he innocently queries.

As well as Mil and the Police Chief, our other major protagonist is an equally unnamed Professor (Kurt Drennen Mirtsching, who is actually director of a chain of pizza restaurants!), resplendent in lab coat, pony tail and dickie bow, whose daughter Maria (Melissa Osborn) has the hots for Mil Mascaras. Well, what young woman wouldn't fall for an overweight, elderly man whose face she has never seen?

Ranged against these guardians of justice are an Aztec Chief (computer scientist/film critic Marco Lanzagorta, who has co-authored several technical papers with this film's writer-producer Jeffrey Uhlmann and is now working on a book about HP Lovecraft) and the Aztec Mummy whom he reanimates with the blood of a human sacrifice (Jonathan Verdejo-Rocha) in a prologue. We also get to see Officer Guerrero (Gary Ambrosia, who was also production designer here and has directed several action flicks) - who for some reason gets a surname while more major characters don't - attempting to arrest the Aztec Mummy only to fall under the hypnotic spell of a blue jewel in the top of the Mummy's staff.

When Mil turns up late for the stake-out at the blood bank, having been slightly delayed due to a tag-team wrestling match over-running, the only cop still around is... Officer Guerrero! And the bad guys jump Mil but he beats them up and so on and so on. There are loads of neat, straight-faced fights in this movie including two wrestling matches, the first of which, the aforementioned tag-team bout, partners Mil with... Santo! (Played by... El Hijo del Santo!)

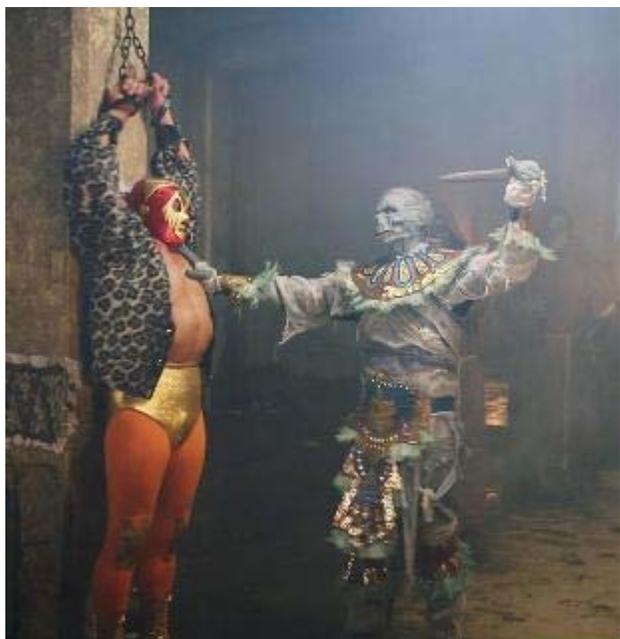
The second bout is Mil Mascaras vs Magister, who plays himself in the ring but is played by Aaron Laue (who was Fox Mulder in an *X-Files* fanfilm!) in a locker room scene where the real Magister is knocked out and replaced by one of the Aztec Mummy's supernatural goons who then adopts his form. One of the absolute sacrosanct rules of Mexican wrestling, which this movie faithfully follows, is that every match must have the same basic plot. Which is this: the bad guy beats up the good guy over and over again, doling out cruel and painful punishment while the crowd screams at the good guy to stand up for himself, then eventually, for no apparent reason, the good guy decides that he can fight back after all and kicks the bad guy's arse. Every match, exactly the same.

The basic plot of this film, by the way, is that the Aztec Mummy and his feather-crowned, flabby friend the Priest have been stealing blood in order to raise an army of dark-robed minions, somewhere inbetween zombies and Jawas. His ultimate aim is to capture and hypnotise Mil Mascaras because once he has the world's greatest human being under his command, everyone will follow him. But the plot is just an excuse on which to hang a whole host of ideas, some of which are dealt with in depth, others of which are skimmed over and then forgotten.

For example, the Professor has a quite brilliant robot called Idaktor which has been programmed with information about "science, art, wrestling, technology, history, philosophy and literature" and this does come into play at the movie's climax. On the other hand, there is one shot where we see that the Prof's vehicle of choice is a (genuine) prototype solar-powered car - supplied by Richard Whelove of the University of Missouri Mechanical and Aerospace Engineering Department - but this is not mentioned in the dialogue and never seen again.

There is also a sort of prophecy: Maria has a birthmark on her back (which we never see) that matches a symbol in some stones in the Aztec Mummy's temple and marks her out as important

in some way, although when she is kidnapped (off-screen) towards the end it is merely to act as bait in a plan to trap Mil Mascaras.



Incidentally, a couple of points about Mil himself. His name (which obviously means 'thousand masks') stems from his habit of wearing not a single distinctive mask like other luchadores but a different mask for every bout (invariably with an M on the forehead). Or in this case, a different mask in every scene. And there is a terrific sequence where the Prof explains to Mil that his mask matches his head perfectly (well, duh, it's made of cloth) and that it has some sort of amazing magic/technology within its fibres that rearranges the design at frequent intervals. In fact the Prof has worked out that there are one thousand different variant designs that this single mask could have, This is a great bit of retrofitted explanation for the many mask designs.

Of course, Mil didn't make or find this mask, it was handed to him by his father, also known as Mil Mascaras, who got it from his father. An early scene

has Mil, desolate at being dumped by his fiancée, talking to an image of his late father reflected in a river.

What else can we find to enjoy in this everything-but-the-kitchen-sink curiosity? There's a scene where Mil travels to America to meet with the US President (Richard Lynch: *Trancers 2*, *Puppet Master 3*, *Cyborg 3*, *Scanner Cop*, *Necronomicon*, *Curse of the Forty-Niner*, *Halloween* remake) and the Joint Chiefs of Staff; there's a sequence where he poses alongside two 1960s-style dolly bird twins (Jenna and Jessica Brondel) for a photo-session, then subsequently discovers that the girls are vampires; there's a scene in a restaurant where a fake waiter poisons Mil with hallucinogenic mushrooms; and there is a burgeoning romance between Mil and Maria. Oh, and Halloween's PJ Soles turns up as herself, judging the tag-team wrestling bout.

Best of all, there is a sequence near the end when a whole gang of luchadores (and a couple of luchadoras) come to help Mil in his battle against the Aztec Mummy's henchmen. This 'Champions of Justice' squad consists of Blue Demon Jr, Neutron, Huracan Ramirez Jr, Dos Caras, Argozan, La Torcha, Maura Incognita, El Medico Angel, El Cardo and Trench Fighter. (Blue Demon and Mil Mascaras both starred in a 1971 lucha movie called *Champions of Justice* and its 1972 sequel.)

Really, *Mil Mascaras vs the Aztec Mummy* (as it is alternatively known) gives lucha fans everything they could possibly ask for. The production values are expertly judged: good when they need to be but allowed to drop when required (the robot, for instance). The acting is all very slightly stilted but never hammy or over-the-top. The script manages to shoe-horn in pretty much everything that you might expect and a whole lot more. This is a film made by lucha fans for lucha fans but it's certainly not a fan-film. The whole thing looks extraordinarily professional, and I use the term 'extraordinarily' for two reasons. First, because no Mexican wrestling movie has ever looked this slick, and second because no film made by Associate Professors of Computer Science has ever looked this good.

Jeffrey Uhlmann wrote the script, produced and executive produced as well as playing the Aztec Mummy. In real life he has a PhD (Oxon) in robotic engineering which must have come in handy as that's also him inside the robot suit. He now teaches and



researches at the University of Missouri-Columbia where “his most cited works relate to unscented Kalman filtering, covariance intersection, and metric trees.” Which, you must admit, is not something that you can say about many other film-makers. His colleague, the gloriously named Dr Kannappan Palaniappan, shares producer and executive producer credits; he obtained his PhD at the University of Illinois. And the whole shebang was directed by Christopher ‘Chip’ Gubera who sings and plays lead guitar with alt rockers The UnFashionables. But I can’t find anything saying where he got his doctorate.

Ah, but there is another credited director - one Andrew Quint - and this is where the story behind *Mil Mascaras: Resurrection* gets interesting and rather complex. Uhlmann originally offered the directing gig to Scott Spiegel of *Evil Dead 2* screenplay fame, whose previous directorial work includes the first *From Dusk Till Dawn* sequel and a 2004 Modesty Blaise movie. Spiegel declined but recommended Jeff Burr, director of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre 3*, *Pumpkinhead 2* and *Puppet Master 4* and *5*, who accepted.

For some reason, Burr was not going to be able to make it out to Missouri until a couple of days before principal photography commenced so he sent over two guys whom he knew and trusted to handle pre-production on his behalf. These were Dan Golden (director of *Bram Stoker’s Burial of the Rats*, who had worked with Burr on *Night of the Scarecrow*) and Chuck Williams (producer of, among other things, [Danny Draven’s Stitches](#), who had worked with Burr on *Straight into Darkness*). Burr also brought ace cinematographer Thomas Callaway to the project. As well as photographing *Night of the Scarecrow* and *Eddie Presley* for Burr, Callaway has DPed such B-movie classics as *Creepozoids*, *Critters 3* and *4*, *Slave Girls from Beyond Infinity*, *Steel and Lace*, *Project: Metalbeast*, *The Dead Hate the Living* and [Doll Graveyard](#).

Unfortunately, there was some sort of falling out between Uhlmann and Burr with the result that Burr and his associates (most of whom were working without contracts) dropped off the project. Nevertheless, Callaway retains sole credit as cinematographer, Golden shares 1st AD credit with Mike Neu (*Last Breath*) and Williams is the third of the named producers. As for Jeff Burr, he evidently took his name off the picture, substituting the pseudonymous ‘Andrew Quint’, which he also used on *Devil’s Den*. (It’s the name of Oliver Reed’s character in the 1967 Michael Winner film *I’ll Never Forget What’s ‘Is Name*.)

This raises an interesting question, which is: how much better could the film have been if these experienced, LA-based film-makers had worked on the whole thing? Well, having watched the film without any knowledge of the behind-the-scenes shenanigans, I have to say: not much. *Mil Mascaras: Resurrection* is absolutely terrific. It’s note-perfect. I honestly couldn’t see any area where it could be improved. I don’t know how much of that is down to whatever work was done on the project by Burr and co and how much is down to Uhlmann and his colleagues - and it doesn’t matter. One’s enjoyment and appreciation of an artwork - of any sort - should not be coloured by knowledge of who created it. That knowledge may colour one’s expectations, of course, but if it colours one’s experience that’s rather sad because it moves one into the realm of the fanboy. And that applies as much to those people who believe that a particular author or film-maker can do no wrong as it does to those scholars and critics whose opinion of a painting or poem changes when it’s confirmed as a long lost Rembrandt or an uncatalogued sonnet by Shakespeare.

Elsewhere in the credits, Vaughn Johnson provided the score and the editor was Thom Calderon whose assistant editor credits include *Gremlins 2*, *The Flintstones* and *Dude, Where’s My Car?* The ‘sound design’ is shared by Kent Gibson and Alan Porzio whose coolest credits are, respectively, Carl Sagan’s *Cosmos* and the 2003 extended cut of *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*. Thaddeus Wadleigh (*The Mangler Reborn*) and Gene Ertel (who worked on Chip Gubera’s earlier films: *Snakebite*, *The Wilding* and *Song of the Dead*) share the curious credit of ‘associate directors of photography’ which I can only imagine is a consequence of the brouhaha referenced above.

‘Creature masks and effects’ were provided by the dudes at Robot Monkey Lab (*Undertow*,

Savage Harvest 2) while Scott Uhlmann (brother?) designed and constructed the robot. Sandra Keeney was in charge of wardrobe while Mil Mascaras designed his own costumes.



Although he didn't direct it, this is very much Jeffrey Uhlmann's movie. As well as his writer, producer, executive producer and actor credits, he is listed as one of seven 'featured stunt/body doubles', one of fourteen 'Mummy henchmen and henchwomen', one of 27 'resurrected creatures', one of six stunt co-ordinators (along with Mil Mascaras and Neutron!) and 'additional mask tailoring'.

Plus he apparently had a personal assistant with the completely brilliant monicker 'Bambi Fontaine'!

You've got to give credit to Uhlmann: against all odds and expectations he has fashioned a film which in its own way has revived the lucha libre genre as successfully as Russell T Davies revived *Doctor Who*. Under his guiding hand, something which could easily have been a labour-of-love, self-indulgent, fanboy monstrosity has emerged as a hugely entertaining movie which both continues and celebrates the dormant genre to which it belongs.

In fact, Uhlmann has made two of the things. When the production of *Mil Mascaras vs the Aztec Mummy* fell apart in 2005 after the departure of Jeff Burr back to LA, Uhlmann, Gubera and Mascaras reteamed to make *Wrestling Women vs the Brainiac* before completing the first film with crew assembled for the second. And just as *Mil Mascaras vs the Aztec Mummy* has been retitled *Mil Mascaras: Resurrection* (although Uhlmann plans to revert to the original title when it hits DVD) so *Wrestling Women vs the Brainiac* has been retitled *Academy of Doom*. I haven't seen the *Wrestling Women* film but the word on the net has it that it's as enjoyable as *MM:R* without being so lavish or ambitious.

MJS rating: A

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Jeffrey Uhlmann

When Jeffrey Uhlmann contacted me to ask if I would like to review his film [Mil Mascaras: Resurrection](#), he described the movie but I replied, "You had me at 'Mil Mascaras'." Having thoroughly enjoyed the film, but heard from other (reliable) sources about its somewhat complex creation, I was naturally delighted when Jeff agreed to an e-mail interview in December 2008.

How, when and why did you become interested in Mexican wrestling movies?

"I've been a connoisseur of genre and cult films for as long as I remember. I find lucha films particularly fascinating because they combine the aesthetic of the classic Universal horror films with comic book-style superheroes. Better still is the fact that the masked heroes actually exist in the real world. It's that interface between the real and the surreal that I find most interesting."

What was the impetus for a group of computer science professors in Missouri to revive this dormant and very culturally specific genre?

"I came to the University of Missouri with a plan to make this film and establish an emphasis area in something I called entertainment engineering. Pre-production activities began back in 2000 right after I arrived but things really started coming together when my colleague, Kannappan Palaniappan (Pal), became involved in 2003. We crossed the interface between the real and the surreal when filming began in late 2004 with Mil in an Aztec tomb constructed in an engineering building at a major university. And of course real-life dining at restaurants in Columbia, MO, with Mil and officials from the university was much like scenes we were shooting for the film. In other words, the world we were filming became the world we were in."

How did you get Mil Mascaras involved and what was he like to work with? (Did you ever see him without a mask?)

"I met him at a technical conference many years ago but we really never worked together closely until around 2002. He's a great guy and as professional as anyone I've ever met. He is very protective of his image, so he understandably has strong standards for his films and requires that they be realistic and respectful of the traditions of the mask. I will always be respectful of those traditions."



Can you give me your take on why Jeff Burr and his LA colleagues dropped off the film, and how did this affect the production?

"I hired Jeff Burr only a few weeks before filming was scheduled to

begin and he hooked us up with some great people who contributed a lot to the project, including cinematographer Tom Callaway and the multi-talented Gary Ambrosia. Our first shoot in December of 2004 had some problems but the second shoot in the spring of 2005 was a fiasco from the beginning. We realised by the third day that Jeff didn't want to shoot the kind of film that we wanted to make and things went downhill from there. At the end of that shoot we had a total of over 50 hours of footage from the two shoots but nothing documenting what had been shot and what was still needed.

“Jeff Burr is a good guy and on a personal level I like him a lot but it was clear that he just wasn't really into making this kind of film. He naturally wasn't happy about our decision not to have him back as director for the last shoot but he understood why we weren't happy with certain things (and certain of his associates). We informed him that whomever we hired for the last shoot would be listed as a co-director and he accepted that.

“However, when we later informed him that he wouldn't be involved in the editing process or any other aspect of post-production he asked us to replace his name with a pseudonym and we accommodated. At that point the official relationship with Jeff Burr was severed. However, we continued to work with Tom Callaway - eg. for colour correction - and I'm still very grateful to Jeff Burr for getting Tom involved. They're both good guys and I look forward to seeing them whenever I'm in Los Angeles.

“As for that third shoot, we were originally planning to hire Rene Cardona III, whose father and grandfather were legendary Mexican genre film directors. In the meantime, however, plans were underway to shoot another Mil Mascaras film *Academy of Doom* at the university. I had brought in Chip Gubera and Bob Swope as instructors in our Information Technology program based on their work on a film called *Song of the Dead* and I invited them to be a part of *Academy*. I realised that if we combined the last shoot of *Resurrection* with the last shoot of *Academy* we could reduce costs significantly which was critical because *Academy's* budget was already very low. That turned out to be a good plan and in the spring of 2006 we shot *Academy* and then proceeded to finally complete *Resurrection*.

“I should point out that Chip and the entire *Academy* crew did an amazing job in pulling off the two shoots because after *Academy* wrapped everyone had to switch gears and start on what Pal and I had planned out for finishing *Resurrection*. That was rough because they had been immersed for weeks in *Academy* and were now having to hit the ground running on what we needed for *Resurrection*. For a lot of it they were flying blind as to how each shot would fit into this other film that they knew little about. I know that was especially challenging for Chip but he's a guy who is always ready to take on any challenge.”

What aspect of the film do you think works best and is there anything that you think could have been improved?

“After the second shoot we didn't have the car stunt or even the final battle with the mummy and we knew that many other scenes were incomplete or would have to be re-shot for quality reasons, so Pal and I had to log all 50+ hours to determine specifically what we had. I then re-wrote parts of the script to allow us to piece together as much as possible so that we could complete the film in one more shoot.



“That last shoot was more complicated than the previous two because we were filling in pieces of scenes that were shot over a year earlier. In a couple of cases shots in the same scene were

filmed a year and a half apart. (In one scene the change in age and voice between shots of the Professor turned out rather jarring.)

“Although it took an inordinate amount of time and effort (and money) to piece everything together, I think the final film captures what was originally intended: an alternative universe in which luchadores and resurrected Aztec mummies are as mundane as cops and robbers. Whatever small issues there are don’t really bother me because I view films like impressionist paintings: the focus should be on immersion into the world that’s depicted rather than on the details of the brush strokes.

“However, if I had to point to something that could be improved it would have to be the scene in which the twins seduce Mil. We just didn’t have the coverage to make that work right, so we ended up piecing together a bunch of disparate elements to make something reasonably coherent.”

How has the film been received and what are the current plans for release?

“The film has played at film festivals around the world to enthusiastic audiences. The reviews have all been extremely positive (except, ironically, for a couple of local reviews in Missouri, where the film was produced). A Spanish review after the Cinema Fantastico festival in Estepona described it as the best lucha film ever made but audience feedback reveals a much broader appeal than what one might expect for a typical lucha film.

“As for distribution, we have had queries from many distributors around the world since 2004, including one very exciting opportunity with one of the majors, but the plan right now is to let the film complete the international festival circuit before making any commitments. I think the last of festivals will be in South America sometime in the spring or summer of 2009.”

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