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Life After That Very Profitable Fake Witch

By [DAVID CARR](#)

[“The Blair Witch Project,”](#) the cult hit released in 1999, ends without ending, but the viewer is pretty sure that what follows after the abrupt camera cut is quite grim. And one of the people who never seemed to make it back from those dark, awful woods was Daniel Myrick, the film’s co-director.

Mr. Myrick spurned the Hollywood blandishments that came his way in the film’s aftermath, instead charting his own course, including a few straight-to-video projects that did not remotely approach the culture-tilting or commercial impact of “Blair Witch,” his first feature. But despite the jokes — and articles — about “The Curse of the Blair Witch,” Mr. Myrick never became frantic about the next big thing.

“I’ve been on the beach in Bermuda for the last few years,” he said. Full beat. “I’m kidding.”

Mr. Myrick, 44, has actually been busy in Morocco shooting [“The Objective,”](#) a military-horror-thriller-buddy movie set in Afghanistan that suggests that [Osama bin Laden](#) is not the only seemingly supernatural force haunting the mountains there.

The film, which will have its premiere Thursday evening at the [Tribeca Film Festival](#), grew out of a script that Mr. Myrick wrote with Mark A. Patton and Wesley Clark Jr. (yes, the son of that Wesley Clark). “Afghanistan is a mystical place completely infused with superstition and religion,” Mr. Myrick explained by phone. “I thought it would be an effective contemporary backdrop for a thriller.”

In the film a [C.I.A.](#) officer joins up with a Special Forces crew for a mission deep in the mountains and tells the team members little, at least very little that is true, about what they are actually looking for. They are confronted by mortal and supernatural threats that leave the crew decimated and wondering precisely what it is up against.

Throughout “The Objective” there are weird visual portents, deadly beams of light and disappearing bodies. The action is complicated and head-spinning, rendered against a foreboding visual backdrop and populated with terse-talking military types. It’s the kind of film that could leave a few audience members scratching their heads, but Mr. Myrick is not particularly interested in meeting the criteria of a studio film. “I am interested in independent film, in doing smaller

projects on my own terms,” he said. “I am not in a rush to do a lot of films. I want to do my own thing, and I think Tribeca and New York is the perfect place for a film like ‘The Objective.’ It is an independent project from start to finish.”

Jeremy Wall of Jaz Films, one of the producers of the movie, can vouch for that.

“He showed us a two-page treatment, and we optioned the film,” Mr. Wall said of “The Objective,” which cost less than \$5 million. “Daniel really didn’t want to make a studio film, and we thought this was a very worthy idea. He has a way of portraying fear without really showing it. He is confident in his audience and confident that he doesn’t have to explain every single little thing to them.”

It is a confidence that found enormous cultural and financial traction nine years ago in “The Blair Witch Project.” A minimalist horror film shot with three lead actors and a few tents in the Maryland woods, it was directed by Mr. Myrick and Eduardo Sanchez, former schoolmates at the [University of Central Florida](#)’s film school in Orlando. Built on the trope of college kids making a documentary, “Blair Witch” was hardly the first time happy-go-lucky types wandered into the woods and to their doom in a movie, but there was magic in the guerrilla shooting style. (“[Cloverfield](#)” recently used a similar conceit with a much larger budget.)

It would be difficult to overstate the impact of “The Blair Witch Project.” After creeping onto the Web in a viral marketing strategy built on a world of conjured folklore, the film played to sold-out theaters and made the covers of both Time and Newsweek. Apart from being a producer’s dream — the movie made on credit cards and \$35,000 that eventually racks up \$250 million in worldwide sales — the stickman totem became part of cultural iconography, and few of us who have spent time in tents since have managed to avoid cracking wise about “Blair Witch.”

Everyone was riveted by the idea of a sequel, save the guys who made the original. Artisan Entertainment forged ahead with a sequel without them. The movie tanked.

The predictable offers to direct other thrillers — including “The Exorcist 4” and another “[Nightmare on Elm Street](#)” sequel — were rebuffed. But the movie they did choose, a screwball comedy called “[Heart of Love](#),” never made it past the script stage. Mr. Myrick then developed and directed an early Web serial called “The Strand,” a Raymond Carveresque weave of stories set amid the daily carnival of Venice Beach in California. Its digital video was eventually edited into a feature, but that never reached theaters either.

With “The Objective” Mr. Myrick is still trying to bushwhack his own path. He used the Web as a casting vehicle where people could post auditions for him to look at. Jeff Prewett, an Australian, made the cut and was cast as Sadler, a member of the Special Forces team. “The first day we met

was on set,” Mr. Myrick said.

Richard Halpern, a longtime friend and a co-producer on the film, said Mr. Myrick was never big on convention.

“He had a lot of opportunities in the studio world, and I go back and forth on that, but Dan is very much an outside-the-box thinker,” he said. “He does his thing the way he sees it and has no interest in making mediocre movies for some sort of career move.”

Mr. Myrick suggested that with the advent of cheaper moviemaking technology and alternative distribution models like digital downloads and direct-to-DVD — much of it presaged by the breakthrough of “Blair Witch” — success was no longer defined by a reserved parking space on a studio back lot.

“ ‘Blair Witch’ gave me some financial security at a time when I was having trouble coming up with the money to pay the phone bill,” he said. “I have high hopes for ‘The Objective,’ and sure, I want to establish myself as a commercially viable director. But being able to say no, to only make the work that you really love and have a good time doing it, is another way to be successful.”

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