

Interview: Robert Englund Goes Beyond Freddy Krueger

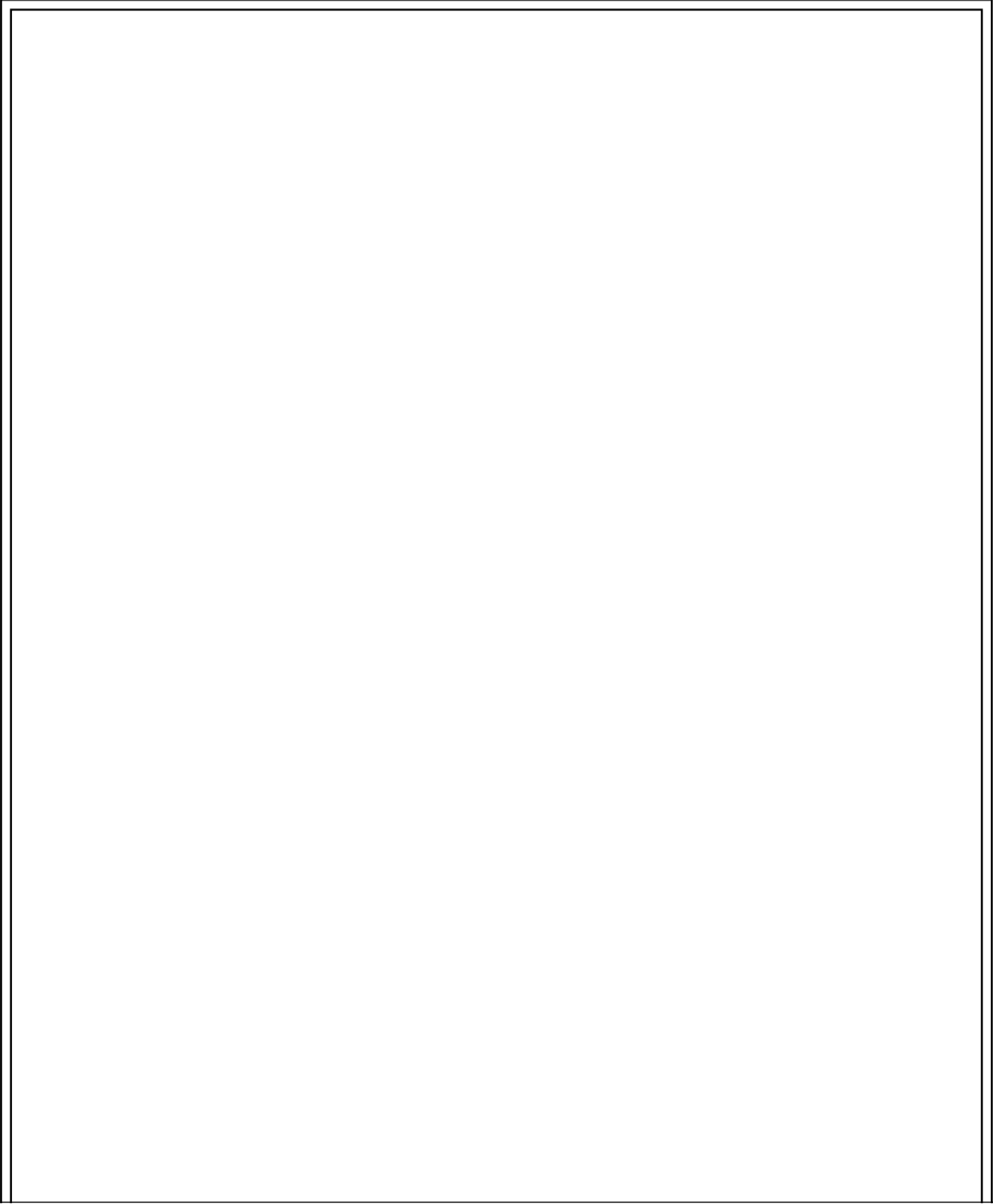
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CHICAGO – Robert Englund will inevitably and forever be linked with his most famous character, Freddy Krueger of “A Nightmare on Elm Street” and its sequels and spin-offs. But he has had a rich journey to Freddy, and connects with him through a myriad of character actor experiences.

Englund started as a classical actor, with training through a program from the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts. When he got back to his native California, he won a role in the cult film “Buster and Billie.” Moving up the ladder from there, it was his part in the 1983 TV mini-series “V” that got him on the map. Freddy was a year later, and the rest is horror film history.

Robert Englund was appearing at Flashback Weekend, an annual horror convention in Chicago. He was there also promoting a local horror film that he participated in, “The Mole Man of Belmont Avenue.” HollywoodChicago.com got this revealing interview, and photographer Joe Arce got a famous pose out of him.





Chiller: Robert Englund at Flashback Weekend, August 12, 2011

Photo credit: Joe Arce of Starstruck Foto for HollywoodChicago.com

HollywoodChicago.com: You were born in California, and grew up in the 1950s and '60s there. What was evident in your childhood about the American Dream that you don't think is present now?

Robert Englund: I can only talk about this in an example way...on the street that I grew up on, the only guy that had a Porsche was a fireman. Because the Porsche in those days was the car for the 'sports car enthusiast.' It had nothing to do with status. We seem to live in a society today where people have things for the sake of having them as opposed to using them. It's silly to have an automatic transmission on a BMW. Sometime, somewhere, that happened.

One of the key peer pressure things that was around when I was younger, if you weren't a jock, you couldn't wear a tie to school on Thursday or a letterman's jacket. And if you weren't a surfer, you couldn't wear your board brand tee-shirt under your Brooks Brother's shirt so it would show through. Now it seems it's individual freedom to lie and pretend to be a jock, or pretend to be a surfer. If you want to identify with something, how about actually doing it? It's like the fake American Dream has taken over the real one.

HollywoodChicago.com: What was your early study regarding acting? Who were your mentors?

Englund: I studied with Lee Strasberg in Los Angeles, and Jeff Corey, who taught Jack Nicholson and Bruce Dern. Then I went to traditional college and the drama department, and tried out for the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts out of London. But I couldn't stay there because of the draft laws...it was either Shakespeare or Vietnam. [laughs] Even though I got in, I couldn't stay there.

While I was spending a summer in Los Angeles, I got a letter from the Royal Academy saying that there had been a falling out between the old school staff and the avant-garde there. So I wound up getting that old school faculty – the ones who had trained Albert Finney and Alan Bates

– because they all moved to Michigan. They found a community there who had earmarked money for the arts and they built this phenomenal ‘League of Repertory Theater’ company, which was full equity, and ended up working there at night and studying during the day on full scholarship. We were the first classically trained American students.

HollywoodChicago.com: What did you learn there that you take with you today?

Englund: Their priority is different from the American priority...they serve the writer first. The writer is god, then the director and then the actor. In America, it's the actor. Their method is that everything can be found in the writing, in the script. It has helped me a lot.

HollywoodChicago.com: What kind of audition or circumstance got you on all the films you did (‘Buster and Billie,’ ‘Hustle,’ ‘Stay Hungry’) before your breakthrough horror role in ‘Eaten Alive’?

Englund: I had gotten typed early in Hollywood as a Southerner, only after doing it once in a Tennessee Williams play, ‘Summer and Smoke.’ But the first audition I had in Hollywood, I was able to beat out half the actors in L.A. to get that role in ‘Buster and Billie,’ directed by Daniel Petrie. Because that film was a hit, I got wound up getting typed. That got me typecast in television roles as a redneck. Then is was the ‘best friend’ and ‘sidekick’ roles, that eventually got me to ‘V,’ [1983 mini-series], and that's what made me recognizable as a name.

HollywoodChicago.com: What was it about the early direction in your career that led you to what would become your trademark type of horror role? Was it simply the right place, right time or was it something else?

Englund: Again, it was typecasting. The phenomenon of ‘Nightmare on Elm Street’ was huge. I didn't choose to be typecast as a Southerner, or best friend or sidekick. I didn't choose to be in horror movies, I just like to go where I'm wanted. The Freddy phenomenon was international, I had no control over it. The first time I went to Italy, I was pulled out of a limo and passed over the crowd like I was in a mosh pit. I have no control over this...I had seen it happen to other friends. One day Mark Hamill was sleeping on my couch, the next day he was the biggest star in the world with ‘Star Wars.’ I realized it's best to surrender and enjoy it, because you can't fight it. What was great for me, that because Nightmare was international, I was able to work in Europe.

So after that, when people asked me to do horror films, whether it was a remake of ‘Phantom of the Opera’ or a Stephen King movie, of course I did them, because I had cache in that genre. I think it was the right decision, because I'm still here. You have to follow the slipstream of what audiences think that you are.



True Classic: Robert Englund in Full Make-up as Freddy Krueger
Photo credit: New Line Cinema

HollywoodChicago.com: Have you studied some of the other horror superstars, such as Bela Lugosi, Boris Karloff, Christopher Lee or Peter Cushing? What have you derived from their horror careers that you have embraced?

Englund: I had a revelation a couple years ago, when I remembered as a child going to my godfather's house. He was West Coast distributor for Simon and Shuster publishers, and he had an entire room of these massive coffee table books. My Mom and Dad would be drinking martinis with my Aunt and Uncle, and I'd be in the room with these coffee table books. And one of them was ‘Life Magazine Goes to the Movies,’ and it was this huge volume of stills from the golden age of movies. And it even had a section on silent films. One the sections in there was on Lon Chaney, the ‘Man of a Thousand Faces.’ There were these postage stamp size pictures, massively laid out, of all the various make-ups he done. It just intrigued and mesmerized me. So if anyone buried themselves in my subconscious, it might have been Lon Chaney.

With hindsight as an adult, I love the work of Boris Karloff, and I also love Vincent Price. I remember having a stoner's appreciation of Vincent

in the 1970s, especially ‘Theater of Blood,’ where he kills all the critics who give him bad reviews, and ‘Dr. Phibes.’ I remember really getting those movies as horror comedy, which was the hybrid that is going on now. I like being compared with Vincent Price. If I have half the longevity that he had, I’ll be a happy cowboy.

HollywoodChicago.com: Not many actors get the opportunity to be present at the birth of a character, and then to literally grow with him, as you did with Freddy Krueger. Since you have a pretty good understanding of him, what you do think his reaction and opinion would be about Robert Englund?

Englund: I think he thinks I’m a motor mouth....a presumptuous a-hole. [laughs]

HollywoodChicago.com: Obviously the first line of any biography of you mentions Freddy. What part of your personality and his personality come together most succinctly, and how do you best honor that when performing as Mr. K?

Englund: The through line, if there is one, is when I’m tired and have been in make-up for 14 hours. It’s the same thing that happens to you when somebody cuts you off, or the slow lane is for passing and you can’t get to your exit. You turn crimson red, scream and see your spittle all over the windshield. That is my link with Freddy, that road rage moment, and that’s what I tap into.

The Flashback Weekend will next be presenting a “Dusk-to-Dawn HorrorFest.” [Click here for details.](#) [15]



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