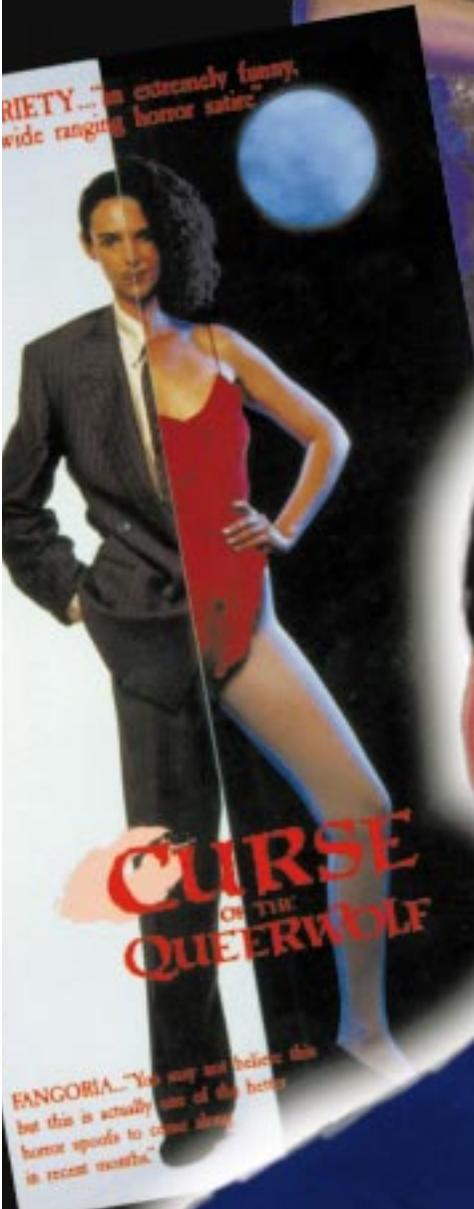
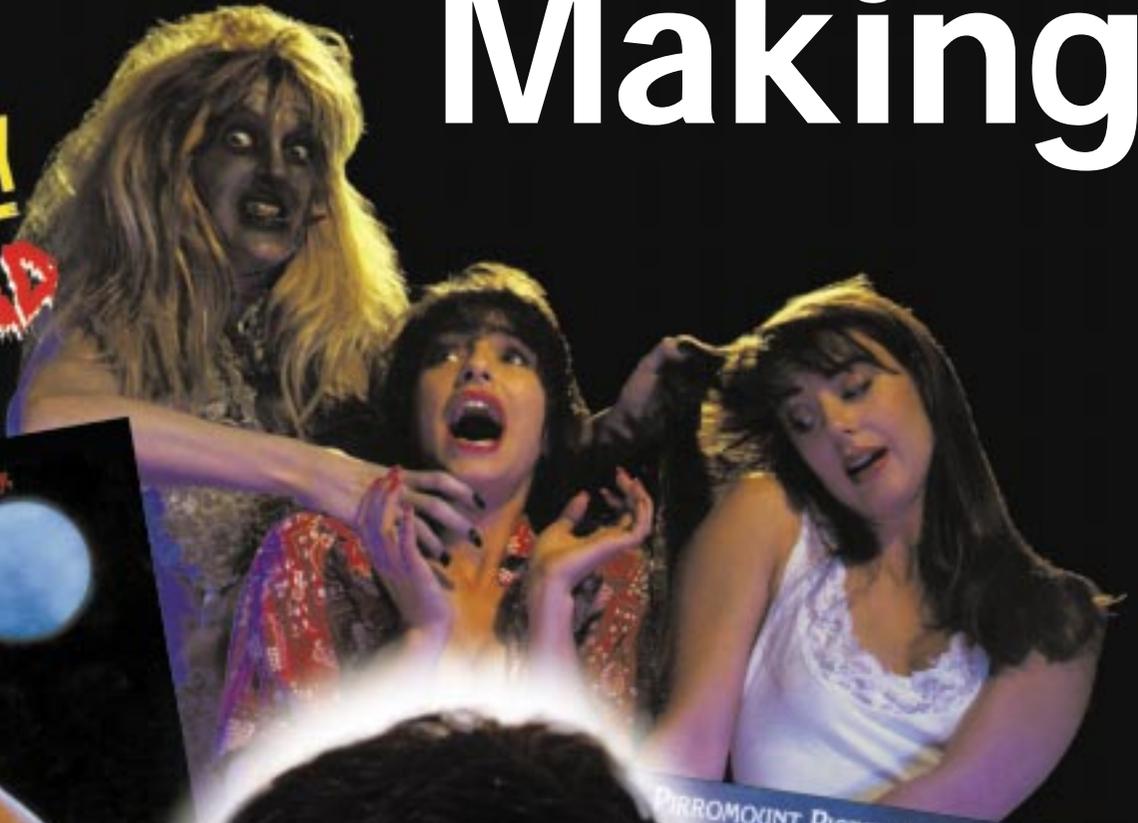


Making

NUDIST COLONY OF THE DEAD



PARROMOUNT PICTURES PRESENTS

A Polish Vampire in Suburbank



Movies for Under \$500

Sure, \$500 won't buy you top-flight talent or equipment. But as Mark Pirro shows, it is possible to make a long-form video with very little money. Even if you aren't aiming for Hollywood, you can pick up some valuable tips on movie-making.

by Richard Popko

Have you ever found yourself in a video store snickering at some of the boxes wedged between the Hollywood blockbusters? The ones with titles like *House Geist*, *Kung Fu Rascals*, and *Deathrow Game Show*? Ever pick one up to read the back of the box? Ever rent one of these flicks to satisfy your morbid curiosity? Hollywood insiders consider these funky off-beat movies "ultra-low budget," since they're usually made for less than \$25,000. Such movies rarely, if ever, see the glow of a movie theater projector.

Yet while these lower-than-B-grade movies don't generate lines outside the local cineplex, they can clean up in the direct-to-video channel. Here's a thought even scarier than some of these movies: Anyone with a script, some friends, a video camera, and a computer can make a feature and sell it for big bucks! What's more, one guy is making a movie with a production budget of less than \$500. This is the story of that guy.

Mark Pirro is carving a niche in the ever-expanding world of alternative videos, and he produced his latest feature on video for \$429 (excluding computer equipment that he'll re-use). His low-budget production secrets can help both budding Roger Cormans and corporate video producers with bosses who say, "Since we don't have a budget left, why don't you just borrow my camcorder,

cast the marketing department, and finish this one in your spare time?"

The man

In 1983 Mark Pirro shot a super-8 (I'm talkin' film here) feature-length comedy starring Eddie Deezen called *A Polish Vampire in Burbank*. You laugh, but Pirro got a distribution deal that landed the movie in Blockbusters across the country. The USA network broadcast it two years in a row. USA did not pick the film up for a third year because, Mark speculates, the network learned they paid him more than 20 times what the film initially cost him to make.

And how much did *Polish Vampire* cost? "About \$2500 plus post-production costs," says Pirro. The film went on to earn more than \$500,000, of which Mark earned \$100,000. Not bad for a guy who never even went to film school.

Mark went on to direct two more super-8 features and two 16mm features. All of his movies have earned money in the video channel. He's still making features, but now he's figured out a way to make them even better and cheaper than his earlier efforts. For his latest project, *Color Blinded*, Mark has gone digital.

A little black and white issue

Color Blinded is a black and white feature-length comedy about an African American woman named Melanie who is dating a

white guy named Dave. When Melanie's wise-cracking friend argues that all white men are the same, Melanie begins to question whether Dave really loves her for who she is, or if the relationship is based around a black and white issue.

A day after Melanie sips a mysterious potion, she is transformed into a white woman. Now in the ultimate disguise, she tracks down Dave to satisfy her curiosity once and for all. What she discovers may be more than she wanted to know. . .

OK, so it's not an ILM special effects extravaganza. But remember, Pirro shot *Color Blinded* on a \$429 budget. Most actors and crew were friends who could get time off work. To fill a couple key roles, he placed a free ad in a trade magazine, *Dramalog*, that read: "Looking for actor and actress for feature film. I can't pay you, but I can give you a copy of the finished movie." The next day, he received over 200 phone calls.

I know what you're thinking: Even without labor costs, how can anyone shoot a feature for less than \$500? It's not as hard as it sounds. But it's not easy either. Mark borrowed some equipment and already owned some other pieces of gear. He shot the movie in Hi8. He borrowed a basic Panasonic video camera from a friend and plugged the video-out into his Sony EVC200 Hi8 VTR. On location he used a low-end NTSC monitor, a generic audio

mixer, an inexpensive PZM microphone, and a simple Lowell lighting kit.

He worked with a three-person crew. Mark operated the camera, one guy held the microphone and operated the mixer, and the other worked the slate and tracked

continuity. Mark made these two associate producers, so they get a cut of the film's profits if it makes any money.

Mark bought a box of two-hour Hi8 tapes for \$65. During production, he filled 13 of them for a total of 26 hours of footage,

aiming for a final cut of 90 minutes. The only food on the set was used as props. Otherwise, it was bring-your-own.

Pirro didn't get any insurance or shooting permits. He insists that he didn't need insurance since everyone knew they were volunteering their services. If police hassled him while filming in the street, Mark would immediately comply with the officer, wait for him or her to leave, then find another street to film on.

Mark did not shoot *Color Blinded* in sequence. Because his cast worked for free, he couldn't impose a schedule. He had to shoot around their availability. He also didn't draw storyboards. According to Pirro, "story boards are only necessary if you're doing a big special effects scene."

Cut with care

After *Color Blinded* was "in the can," Pirro was ready to edit. He posted the movie in the guest room of his house (purchased in part from the royalties he made off of *Polish Vampire in Burbank*).

He worked on a Pentium 166MHz with 128MB RAM and a ViewSonic C17PS 17-inch monitor. But what makes this story truly inspirational is the video editing equipment he used. Pirro posted *Color Blinded* on a miroVIDEO DC30 capture board and Adobe's Premiere 4.2 (included with the DC30). For storage, he used a 4GB Seagate Barracuda A/V drive, an Iomega Jaz drive, and 12 Jaz cartridges.

Just how did he cut a feature on such low-end equipment? Getting Mark to talk openly about his latest effort was like asking a magician how a particular trick is done. Some secrets just can't be revealed. But Mark wants the world to know that it's not impossible to break into show business. All it takes is an idea, a little patience, and the will to make it happen.

Mark tried a number of capture cards (including FAST's A/V Master, Truevision's Bravado 1000, and miro's DC20), before deciding that the miro DC30 best met his needs. But his editing system wasn't without problems. Mark experienced crashes and fatal errors nearly every day of editing, so he devised a simple workaround. He found that turning his computer off every 45 minutes or so and then turning it back on seemed to set things right.

Staying On Budget With No Budget

Mark Pirro's tips for filmmakers producing extremely low-budget features:

- **Keep everyone motivated.** The minute you doubt yourself or your project, you're doomed. Once you lose motivation, everyone else will lose interest in the project as well.
- **Expect at least one actor to give you problems.** In *Polish Vampire*, it was the star—Eddie Deezen (the obnoxious nerd in Spielberg's "1941"). Midway through production, Eddie said he didn't want to do the film anymore. Pirro had to rewrite the script (Eddie dies) and take Eddie's place in the movie.
- **Kill a hostage.** Figuratively that is. If one of your cast or crew cops an attitude or becomes a prima donna, get rid of him or her immediately. A person with a bad attitude will bring everyone else down. Removing the problem person right away reinforces to the remaining cast and crew that you mean business.
- **Use your friends.** If they want to act and will act for free, use them. If you know someone with a good camera, ask to borrow it in exchange for a part in the movie. If there's a person who won't act for free, promise them points (a percentage of the film's profits).
- **Pass on permits.** If you're going to be paying people, it's probably a good idea to secure insurance and shooting permits. But if everyone is volunteering their time and services, Mark doesn't think permits are worth the hassle. A one-day shooting permit can cost more than the entire budget.
- **Get release forms.** Everyone who appears in your movie should sign a release form. Then if one of your actors becomes famous some day, they can't say, "I don't want you showing the film anymore."
- **Schedule your shoot.** Plan your shoot around your actors' availability. After all, they're working for free. Get your actors to commit to certain days during the month when they promise to be on the set. Expect one or two of them to flake out on you at the last minute at least once during the shoot. Be ready to shoot alternate scenes on any given day.
- **Work six-hour days.** Don't push your cast and crew to work more than six hours a day. If they get burned out, they'll leave the project.
- **Get E & O Insurance, if needed.** If you plan to broadcast your masterpiece on TV, you'll need E & O (Errors and Omissions) Insurance. This can cost you some serious dough. An E & O person will watch your movie and ask for release forms proving you had permission to film a particular person or thing. E & O for *Polish Vampire* cost \$8000 and some valuable footage. When asked where he'd shot a castle scene, Mark said Universal Studios. He was told he'd need a release from Universal saying he was allowed to shoot there. When he couldn't provide one, he had to cut the scene from the film.
- **Don't tell everything.** When you're meeting with a distributor, don't divulge any more information than necessary. When asked how much your film cost to make, tell them "under a million dollars." If you shot your movie on video, but it doesn't look like you shot it on video, there's no need to volunteer that information, either.
- **Have a memorable title.** *A Polish Vampire in Burbank, Buford's Beach Bunnies, Nudist Colony of the Dead.* 'Nuff said.

Before Mark could begin cutting he had to organize his 26 hours of footage. First he labeled each tape with the scenes on it. Then he created a log-sheet on paper listing every scene in sequence and the corresponding tape that held each scene.

Once he had the scenes sequenced on paper, he was ready to digitize. I know what you're thinking: How did this guy edit a 90-minute feature on a 4GB drive? In bits and pieces, but we'll go into that in a minute.

Color Blinded

Budget Breakdown

Pre-production start date: March 3, 1996
 Production start date: May 5, 1996
 Production wrap date: November 24, 1996
 26 shooting days

Production Budget:

Mic boom pole	\$9.97
Mouthwash, bubble bath, etc.	\$4.40
Audio mixer	\$173.19
Sony Hi8 Tapes	\$54.90
Ivory Snow detergent	\$5.57
Three spare bulbs for light kit	\$70.15
Food props	\$107.35
Menu props	\$3.00
Camera	\$0
Lighting package rental	\$0
Locations	\$0
Permits	\$0
Insurance	\$0
Costumes	\$0
Makeup	\$0

Total Production Budget \$428.53

Post-Production Equipment:

Post start date: November 1996
 Post finish date: Any Day Now
 Total post hours: Lots and lots

miro DC30 Capture Card	\$710
4GB Seagate Barracuda hard disk	\$999
IomegaJaz Drive	\$399
12 Jaz cartridges	\$1200
ViewSonic 17-inch monitor	\$850
Additional Memory for computer	\$300
Editing Time	\$0
Betacam Tape Deck Rental	\$250

Total post equipment expenses \$4708

Low-budget letter-boxing

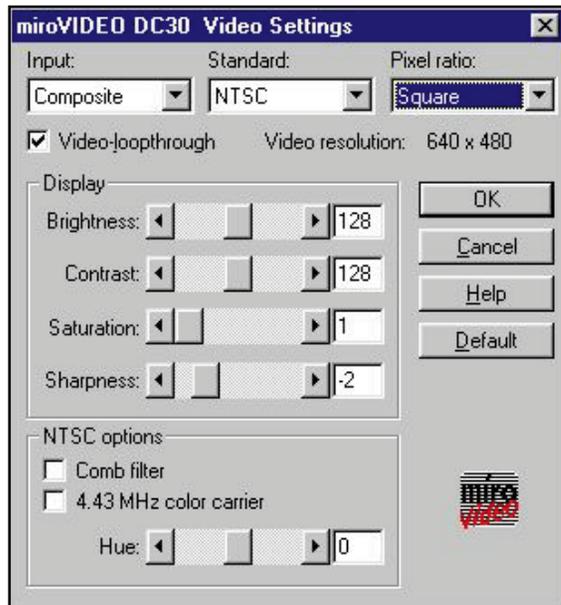
Mark didn't want *Color Blinded* to look like it was shot on video, citing that people have visual expectations when they watch a movie. "When people see video," Mark says, "they immediately liken it to game shows, soap operas, home movies, and porn." Mark needed to figure out how to make his video look more like film.

Before he had shot any tape, Mark knew he wanted *Color Blinded* to look like the letter-boxed video version of a widescreen movie. During production Mark kept a small television monitor on the set. He covered the top and the bottom of the screen with masking tape, leaving a 16:9 viewing area. He composed each shot while looking at the masked monitor. In post he set Premiere to capture one field at half resolution and at an aspect ratio to 16:9.

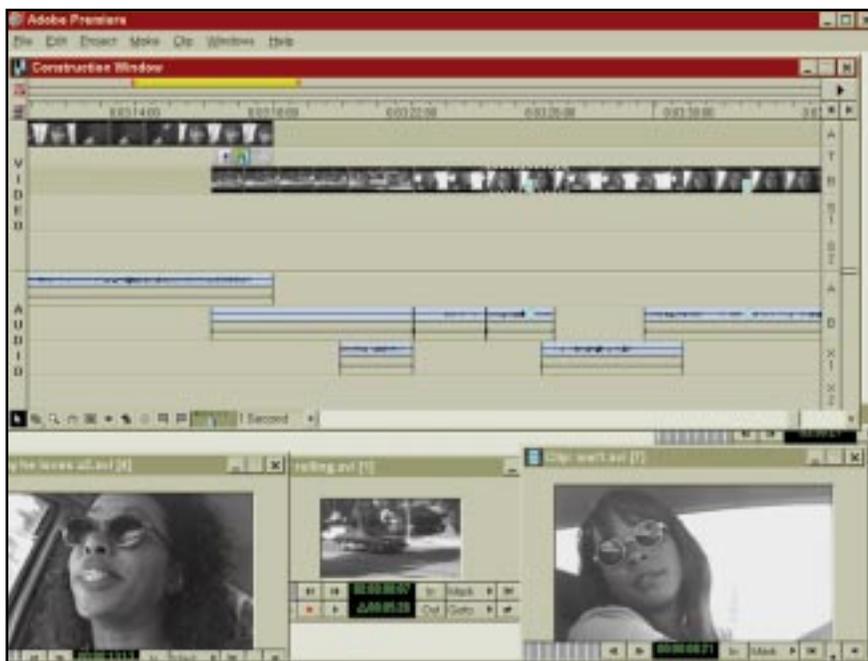
Although Pirro shot in color, he decided to post *Color Blinded* in black and white, building on the movie's black and white social issues. More importantly, when he tried editing in color, the output looked too

much like video tape. Mark says, "Someone needs to come up with a filter that will—at the click of a button—transform your work into something that looks like film."

But since Mark didn't have such a filter, here's what he did: Under Premiere's "Video Settings," Mark dragged the saturation level to +1 and the sharpness down to -2. He left everything else at the default settings. Even after dragging the video-



During capture, Pirro rolled back the miro DC30's saturation and sharpness values, set the aspect ratio to 16:9...



...and edited his footage in Adobe Premiere.



The finished version of *Color Blinded* has a black-and-white cinematic letter-boxed look.

capture quality slider to its highest setting, these settings reduced digitization requirements to less than 2MB/sec.

Mark then started editing the movie in sequence. If the clips he was editing overflowed his 4GB A/V drive, he dragged the excess clips to his C: drive. As soon as he got eight minutes or so of edited footage, he'd drag the sequence over to a Jaz cartridge, clear some space on his main data drive, and work on the next sequence.

Mark continued this process until he had his final cut on 12 Jaz cartridges. He rented a Betacam SP deck and layed off to tape in one night. Working chronologically with the Jaz cartridges, he loaded the data from each onto his C: drive, played the contents through the DC30's S-video output, and dumped it onto Betacam.

Mark scored the movie with Creative Labs' SoundBlaster 64 and the bundled ➤

Q & A With Mark Pirro

Working on ultra-low-budget films gives Mark a unique view on movie-making and on the movie industry as a whole.



Q: How did you first get into low-budget film making?

A: I received a super-8 movie camera from my parents as a Christmas present. I was 13 at the time and I began shooting little films around my neighborhood using classmates and neighborhood kids. When I turned 18, I moved out here to Hollywood and pursued the dream. This time, I used friends I made while working as a tour guide at Universal Studios. My budgets grew from a few hundred dollars to a few thousand.

Q: How lucrative has it been for you?

A: Depends on the film. So far, *Polish Vampire in Burbank* has returned the best profit. But that's probably because I own 82 percent of it. Other films have ranged from 40 percent ownership to no ownership at all. On the no-ownership ones, I usually got paid as a "work for hire," and never earned any royalties. On the ownership ones, I have to track the films as sales are made to make sure a distributor won't rip me off.

Q: When going about your latest feature, what were some of the most difficult obstacles you had to overcome?

A: Finding actors I could depend on. In many cases, they were working for free, so I had to keep them motivated. If you get dedicated actors, this will come naturally. But unfortunately, since you can't really get established talent, you will, in many cases, wind up with very inexperienced actors who can't remember lines, match action, or hit marks. This can be murder in editing.

Securing a competent crew is another tough problem. I try to keep my crews down to a bare minimum. But even with those, there will be times when someone can't make it, so you have to be prepared to compensate. Keep in mind, you're asking for something like a six-month commitment. Not many folks will give you that for free.

Q: Once your project's in the can, how do you secure a distributor for your film?

A: The grace of God and a good promotional hook. There are certain "elements" to help sell a film: name actors in it, production value, in some cases—sex, violence, acclaim, a Roman Numeral in the title. It's like selling anything. There has to be a value to it. If your film has enough of these elements, you have a shot for a sale. Many filmmakers want to make these "personal" films which sometimes have no interest to anyone but themselves and their immediate family. You may find *Sap Gathering In Illinois* an incredibly fascinating subject matter, but many may not. ➤

Q & A With Mark Pirro



Q: Any words of advice for people attempting a feature? What are some pitfalls to avoid?

A: Prepare to immerse yourself for a LONG time, and to WANT it more than anything in the world. Pitfalls? Every day of production, something will be working against you. Every day, your job will be to solve a current problem. Once you solve [one], another will come up. Watch out for egos (yours and others) to stand in your way.

Q: What do you have to say about critics who downplay what you're doing?

A: Go out and make your own movie and let me critique it. You'll note you don't hear Roger Ebert talk about his attempt at screenwriting: *Beyond The Valley Of The Dolcs*.

Q: What were the factors that led you to believe you could actually do a digital feature using such rudimentary technology?

A: Since I did my first and second features with much more rudimentary technology, doing this one with the current technology, which is light-years ahead, is a godsend.

Q: How did you discover that you could do a digital feature?

A: It was mainly experimentation. Tried one capture board, didn't like it, tried another, and another, and another. I never really got to a point where I "discovered" I could do it. It's sort of like my early super-8 features. I never really discovered anything until the film was done and then I realized I could do it. Regarding this film, I haven't DONE it yet. I'm still DOING it.

Q: What are the biggest advantages of shooting video over film?

A: Cost...uh...cost....cost...did I mention cost? Also, you can steal shots that would be much more difficult using 35mm or even 16mm. It's easy to slip into a public (well-lit) place with a video camera and grab an establishing shot or two. In fact, in a couple of weeks, my lead actor and I are going to a hospital to get a few "pick-up" shots. We'll be armed with a camcorder and will arouse no suspicion.

Q: Will you be going back to super-8 anytime soon?

A: No f*****g way!

Voyetra's MIDI Orchestrator. He used his computer's mouse, not a musical keyboard, for all his sequencing. Based on my extensive experience playing keyboards and composing with MIDI, I think Mark's score sounds pretty good.

What's left? Mark's currently shopping for a distributor. With his track record, you should soon be able to find *Color Blinded* at a video store near you. Until then, you can find a clip on www.dv.com. **DV**

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For more information about the products in this article, circle the Reader Service numbers on the Reader Service card on page 81 in this issue.

Jaz Drive	lomega	RS#207
MIDI Orchestrator	Voyetra	RS#213
miroVIDEO DC30	miro	RS#214
Premiere	Adobe	RS#209
SoundBlaster 64	Creative Labs	RS#215

Mark Pirro Filmography

Movie Title	Year	Medium	Budget
<i>Buns</i> (20 minutes)	1978	super-8	\$300
<i>The Spy Who Did it Better</i>	1979	super-8	\$1,600
<i>A Polish Vampire in Burbank</i>	1983	super-8	\$2,500
<i>Deathrow Gameshow</i>	1987	35mm	\$200,000
<i>Curse of the Queerwolf</i>	1988	super-8	\$10,000
<i>Nudist Colony of the Dead</i>	1991	8,16,&35mm	\$35,000
<i>Buford's Beach Bunnies</i>	1992	35mm	\$300,000
<i>Color Blinded</i>	1997	Hi8	\$428.53

To learn more about making low-budget features, check out Mark's book, *Ultra Low Budget Movie Making* (\$19.95). The spiral-bound, 208-page manual covers tips, tricks, and techniques you'll want in your arsenal before you start a feature-length project. And if you're curious as to see what kind of movie you can actually create on a limited budget, check out some of Pirro's earlier films. You can find them at a well-stocked local video store or you can order directly from Mark. *Polish Vampire In Burbank*, *Curse of the Queerwolf*, and *Nudist Colony of the Dead* are available for \$19.95 each. E-mail Mark directly at au522@lafn.org for more information.