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Bad Boys on Film

Roger Corman-collaborator
Beverly Gray critiques 'Cecil B.
Demented'

By [David Templeton](#)

Writer David Templeton takes interesting people to interesting movies in his ongoing quest for the ultimate post-film conversation. This is not a review; rather, it's a freewheeling, tangential discussion of art, alternative ideas, and popular culture.

"Well, it's no masterpiece of modern cinema--but I had fun with it." That pithy pronouncement by author Beverly Gray, in reference to *Cecil B. Demented*--the latest in-your-face, censor-baiting extravaganza from cinematic bad boy John Waters--is among the most elegant film critiques I've ever heard. It's short and sweet, with a haiku-like simplicity that . . . hey, wait a minute.

"It's no masterpiece
of modern cinema, but
I had fun with it."

Hot damn, it *is* a haiku!

I suppose Gray's knack for stylish brevity is to be expected. As a former development executive and script editor for Roger Corman--another infamous cinematic Bad Boy--Gray has surely soaked up a bit of Corman's knack for simplicity and speed.

We're talking about the guy who made *Little Shop of Horrors* in two days. The guy whose films rarely run over 80 minutes.

"One of Roger's greatest skills is knowing how to make things swifter and tighter," Gray agrees. "He can find the flab in any film."

There's no flab in Gray's new book about her former boss, *Roger Corman: An Unauthorized Biography of the Godfather of Indie Filmmaking* (Renaissance, \$23.95). As satisfying as eavesdropping on a roomful of glamorous strangers, the tightly constructed biography stitches Gray's first-hand Corman experience with at least 80 interviews of stars and actors who rose up through the ranks of the Corman factory system. While hardly the kind of treacly homage that usually appears in books about Corman, Gray is affectionate and fair, praising her mentor's creativity and courage while challenging his commitment to commerce over craft.

Speaking of which, let's *talk* about commerce over craft.

In *Cecil B. Demented*, a band of filmmaking terrorists, led by Cecil (Stephen Dorff) attempt to bring down the artistically corrupt movie-making industry. Angry at the commercialization of the cinematic art form, the "Filmmakers from Hell," as they call themselves, kidnap a shrill, aging, big-studio superstar actress (Melanie Griffith), and force her to star in their own bizarre, politically-charged art films. Eventually, she grows to like it. Working like commandos with cameras, Cecil and company prowl the streets (without permits, of course), staging their outrageous scenes as quickly and cheaply as possible.

Looks like fun.

"It certainly gave me a lots of Roger Corman memories," remarks Gray, who lives near UCLA, where she teaches a popular course in down-and-dirty screenwriting. "When Cecil says, 'The Hollywood system stole our sex and co-opted our violence,' it really reminded me of Roger. He always told us that we didn't have going for us the same things that MGM had going for it, or Fox, or Columbia. We were never going to have the big stars or the lavish budgets, so what our movies had to have was something a little edgier, a little smarter, a little bolder, a little more off-the-wall. Something the big studios wouldn't *dare* do."

It was toward the end of Gray's tenure with Corman--during which she'd worked on films from *Deathrace 2000* to *Carnosaur*--that the indie mogul began to witness a change taking place.

"The things that Roger had always scored points with, a little more violence, a little more sex, a little more outlandish appeal, the big studios were now beginning to do," she says. "With much bigger budgets. It was kind of a struggle for Roger to watch that."

It's common knowledge that directors like Spielberg and Lucas changed the rules of modern filmmaking by showing studios what a blockbuster could really be. But Corman's view of the change goes even deeper.

"Roger saw that what happened with *Jaws* and *Star Wars* was that the B-movie and the A-movie traded places," Gray says. "Before the change, the studios gave their biggest budgets to the classy films, the drama and costume epics. The science fiction and action films were always made with the low budgets. Now, the Schwarzeneger movies cost 100 million dollars, and the serious dramas--if

they're made at all by the studios--are given smaller budgets."

It's enough to make little Cecil sick.

There's a certain irony in the way that Corman, who more-or-less invented the independent film, is also an icon of financial prudence, a guy who'd much rather think of himself as a successful businessman than as an artist

"Roger is a total paradox," Gray observes, "a man pulled between wanting to make good films and wanting to make money. Ultimately, the money-making side of Roger always wins out."

Though Corman's company, Concorde-New Horizon Pictures, is still releasing films--mainly straight-to-video fare patched together from outtakes of other films--Gray says production has almost stopped.

"I think he's stopped enjoying movies," Gray suggests. "One time he *loved* movies. He *loved* packing a screen with thrills and chills. Movies motivated his life and gave him a lot of fun. Now I think he feels movies more of a burden than a pleasure."

Even so, Corman is proud of his standing as a radical force in Hollywood.

"I think he would identify with John Waters' movie," says Gray, "especially its criticism of the MPAA. I loved the chant they used: 'Hey! Hey! MPAA! How many movies did you censor today?' Roger would love the spirit of that, because Roger has always had the same suspicion--that the MPAA was out to *get* the little filmmaker.

"Of course," she adds, "the Filmmakers from Hell were definitely not Roger's kind of

people. They're a little too psychotic."

And there's one other thing Roger Corman wouldn't have liked about *Cecil B. Demented*, which runs exactly 88 minutes.

"I'm certain," says Beverly Gray, "that he'd think it was way too long."

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