

Adapting Poe's Classic Poem "Annabel Lee"

Q & A with Writer/Director Michael Rissi

Q: What was the genesis for this feature film adaptation of *Edgar Allan Poe's 'Annabel Lee'*?

It's a pretty crazy story. And it's even more unlikely than it is crazy. My wife Maria Lydia and I happened to meet (Executive Producer) Bill Bordy while on vacation in Eastern Europe. We were part of the same tour group. And we basically just hit it off.

After finding out that Producer Roger Corman picked up my independent feature "Up Against Amanda" for worldwide distribution, Bill shared with me that he and his friend Barbara James had always been interested in developing the last poem Poe ever wrote, *Annabel Lee*, into a feature film script. Eventually, he sent me a treatment they had written. I found the idea of making a movie based on the poem intriguing.

Ultimately, it came down to a challenge. If I could write a screenplay he liked, he would finance an independent production of the film.

Q: What about Edgar Allan Poe's work do you appreciate?

To begin with, I'm a lifelong fan of the horror and suspense thriller genres. The "Tell Tale Heart" is probably my favorite of his short works because it elicits such a strong emotional reaction from the reader with such economy. Poe was the original master of the detective story as well.

Q: How do you go about adapting his "Annabel Lee" poem to a feature length film?

The poem contains a story of sorts, about the tragic death of a lover and the setting is by the sea. Beyond that, there really isn't much of a story. So for my own inspiration in writing the screenplay, I found it helpful to look through the poem to find elements that I personally felt were cinematic. The theme of obsessive, almost maddening, romantic love is what drives the poem.

Part of what makes the poem interesting is its message that Love transcends Death; that love can live on, even after someone dies. I loved this concept and it's what I latched on to. I took this theme, and worked in the concept of poetic justice, where we can celebrate Good over Evil and the victory of Love over Death. The story I wound up writing embodies the comforting notion that even after pain and tragedy, there can be rebirth.

Q: Art is central to the story...

Bill Bordy always wanted the main character to be a painter. And I liked that idea myself. In order to develop a workable plot to fit with my style of filmmaking, I decided to focus on the concept that art, like love, is timeless.

When you love someone, even if they're far away or dead, time has no impact -- you still love. To me, that's really the whole point of Poe's poem. Art is like this too, it transcends time. There is a theory of "mutability" in art studies that says art is immortal; it lives on even after the artist himself dies. Certainly an artist like Poe and his work have a certain immortality.

In our story, having Jack be an artist who is approached by this beautiful and mysterious woman who asks him to paint her, preserving her image on canvas, reinforces the theme of timelessness. And along those lines, I came up with the idea that a grandfather clock, a symbol of time itself, could become pivotal to the plot in an intriguing and novel way.

Q: What do you hope your audience carries away from your film?

The best storytellers care first and foremost about their audience, and that trumps anything personally that you as the artist might want to say. One of my directing teachers at USC School of Cinema was Edward Dmytryk (*The Caine Mutiny*, *Raintree County*). He used to say there are many rules for telling good stories, and while nearly all of them can be broken on occasion, there is one Cardinal Sin – and that is to be dull. I agree with that.

Ultimately people experience your art and they determine whether it's timeless or not. People will respond to what they can relate to -- what is true or meaningful in relation to their own experiences.

Now having said that, from a directorial perspective, I believe in having a strong point of view, a style of presentation using every cinematic technical tool available to support and enhance the story. I know audiences can always appreciate a film that has a fresh perspective on things they experience every day. I hope that in "Annabel Lee" they see a fresh perspective on a genre they maybe thought they knew. My goal from the start was for this story to be contemporary and yet also have an aspect of timelessness that will ensure that it can be enjoyed 50 years from now.