

ShockerFest 2004

By **MARIJKE ROWLAND**
BEE ENTERTAINMENT WRITER

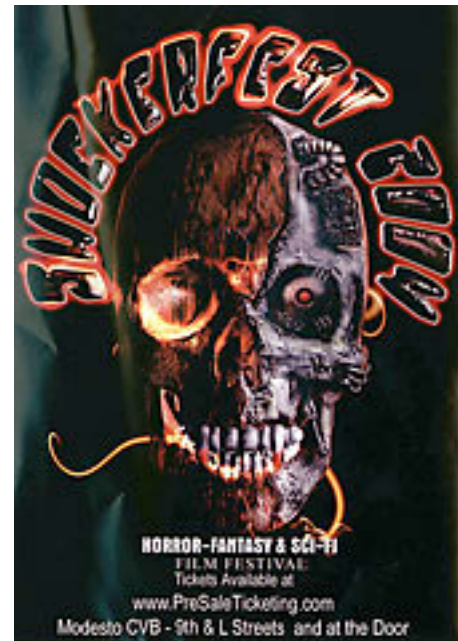
Last Updated: September 17, 2004, 10:02:06 AM PDT

It's alive! Alive!

ShockerFest 2004 is back and set to bring the best in independent horror, fantasy, science fiction and animation to Modesto's only film festival.

Now in its third year, the festival continues to grow and bring recognizable stars and industry professionals to town. This year, 71 films will be shown from Sept. 24-26 at Modesto Centre Plaza.

Special guests slated to appear include Gunnar Hansen, who played the original Leatherface in "The Texas Chainsaw Massacre," and FX and makeup master Rick Gonzales, who worked on the George A. Romero cult classic "Day of the Dead." Among the returning guests are actress Brinke Stevens ("Slumber Party Massacre") and actor David Hess (Wes Craven's "Last House on the Left").



Festival organizer George Baker said the event has grown, in part, because it focuses on specialized genres.

"We found a niche two years ago and continue to fill that niche," Baker said. "We're very happy with (our) growth."

The film festival is an offshoot of Baker's other venture, the Fireside Foundation.

The foundation promotes independent film and young filmmakers through workshops, showcases and scholarships. All proceeds from the festival will go toward the foundation and the Modesto Junior College radio, TV and film department.

The close to 200 entries for this year's festival -- nearly double last year's submissions -- represent 15 countries. Films selected for screening came from as far away as Japan, Australia, Ireland and Argentina.

Some local films also made the cut, including "Fall" and "The Black Violin," by Modesto filmmakers, and "My Beautiful Wickedness," by an Oakdale-based producer.

The festival's impressive track record also may be driving submissions. Baker said every feature film screened in the past two years has received DVD distribution.

Still, he said, even more encouraging than the increased numbers is the increased quality of submissions. Each film was reviewed and scored by three screeners; the top-scoring films were selected in each genre.

"The quality from the first year increased 100 percent to the second year and again has taken another big step up this year," Baker said. "There were some excellent films that missed (getting in) by a point or two."

More recognizable actors appear in this year's offerings, as well. Hansen, who played the first Leatherface, stars in the film "Chainsaw Sally" and will attend its West Coast premiere at the festival.

Other stars of note:

Marina Sirtis (Counselor Deanna Troi on "Star Trek: The Next Generation") and Dean Haglund (Langly on "The X-Files" and "Lone Gunmen") star in the ghost story "Spectres."

Adam West (TV's Batman) appears as a mysterious bookshop keeper in the "Twilight Zone"-like "Tales from Beyond."

Margot Kidder (Lois Lane from the Superman films) is featured as a psychic in one of the four intertwining tales in "Death4Told."

Curtis Armstrong (Booger from the "Revenge of the Nerds") stars as a small-town mortician in the short horror film "Conversations."

Awards again will be handed out for best feature picture in horror, fantasy, sci-fi and animation, as well as short and minishort in some categories. Best-actor and best-actress trophies will go out in the three live-action genres, and one best-screenplay honor will be awarded. The winner of the latter automatically will be entered in the U.S. Screenplay Festival.

New this year is the best-score award for all four genres.

Effects and makeup master Gonzales will receive a technical-achievement award for his more than 35 years in the business. His film "Day of the Dead" will screen Saturday night.

The weekend also will include workshops on everything from screenwriting to effects to movie music.

Proceeds from a silent auction during the opening-night wine and cheese reception will go toward the Modesto Film Commission and Fireside Foundation MJC Scholarship Fund. Three scholarships will be handed out at the festival to MJC students.

Last year, some 600 festivalgoers attended the weekendlong event. Baker said he hopes to top 1,000 this year.

"I think (the festival) is being accepted all over the world," he said. "Believe me, we would love to be able to take over a multiscreen cineplex for the weekend to show everything that comes through. But that's just not possible yet."

ShockerFest 2004 is Sept. 24-26 at the Modesto Centre Plaza. Workshops begin 10 a.m. Sept. 24; wine and cheese reception 4:30 p.m.; Dinner With the Stars 7 p.m. Three simultaneous screenings 10 a.m.-9 p.m. Sept. 25, 10 a.m.-6 p.m. Sept. 26. Award presentation closes festival at 6 p.m. Sept. 26. Tickets \$15 per day or \$35 for all three days. Dinner With the Stars is \$40. Student passes \$25, total weekend passes \$75. Call The Modesto Convention and Visitors Bureau, 526-5588, or Fireside Foundation, 537-5221. www.shockerfest.com.