

Beyond the Tales

By Nate Barlow

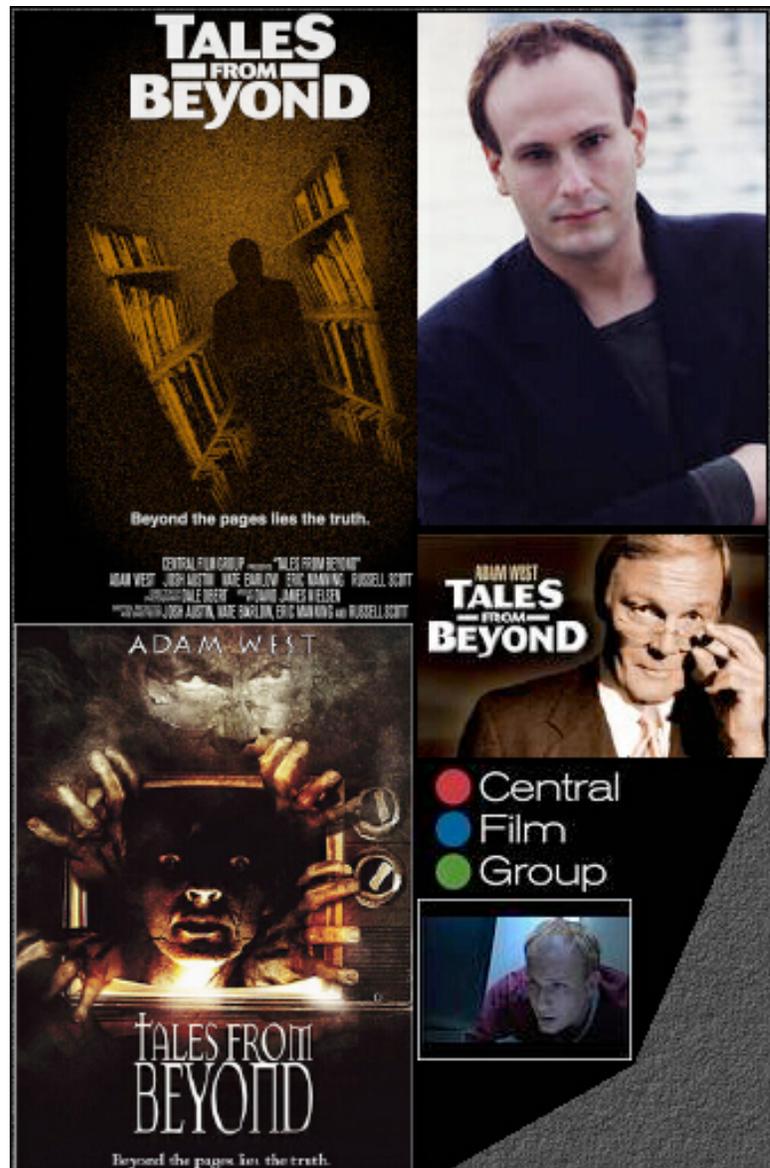
Cheap, good and fast... when it comes to film making, you consider yourself fortunate to achieve two of the three. Nailing all of them is deemed an impossibility.

Take my film Tales From Beyond, which just came out on DVD October 24th. The budget was \$200,000. That's a lot of money for most people, most of the time, but in film making terms, it's miniscule (so much so that the Screen Actors Guild considers a film made for \$200,000 ultra-low budget).

Now look at good. My partners and I think Tales From Beyond came out pretty well (there are always some things you later wish you could change), but ultimately, that determination is up for each individual viewer to decide. What can't be argued is the amount of effort that we put into Tales From Beyond to try to make it good. A lot of love went into making the movie—it wasn't just tossed together to make a quick buck.

Finally, there is fast. This is the one that beat us! Tales From Beyond took over twenty months to complete, and more importantly, another two years passed before the film was finally distributed by Anthem Pictures. That's a long time to live with a project, especially with distribution, not just completion, being the real goal.

So you can understand my excitement at seeing my directorial-debut feature in stores on DVD.



Tales From Beyond is a Twilight Zone-esque anthology film by four writer-directors, each of whom directed one of the four stories comprising the entire film. It stars Adam West (TV's Batman) as a mysterious bookstore owner, Jay, who leads a young couple into the amazing world of his books. The four stories are: "Abernathy" (directed by Russell Scott), "Nex's Diner" (directed by Eric Manning), "Life Replay" (directed by myself) and "Fighting Spirit" (directed by Josh Austin). The interconnecting segments were co-directed by the four filmmakers as a team.

Tales From Beyond originated in January 2003. The initial plan was for each team member to direct a short per month, and each month would be dedicated to a different genre. Additionally, we would all act for each other, providing the opportunity to play a wide variety of roles in a short period of time (all of us do play multiple roles in Tales From Beyond).

That concept didn't last long. While shorts were great for showcasing our skills and could have been distributed individually online, we decided that interconnecting them to form a feature would serve us much better in terms of seeking the type of distribution that could really further our careers. Eric had found a used bookstore that he thought would make for an incredible location, so I went home that weekend and crafted a draft of the interstitials centering on an antiquarian bookshop. Save for rearranging the order of the shorts, that first draft ended up being almost identical to the final shooting script.

Of course, once we had committed to making a feature, shooting down and dirty was no longer an option. Up went the budget, which we were funding out of pocket (ouch!). Out of necessity (so we could maintain our day jobs and some semblance of an income), we had to shoot nights, weekends and any other times that might fit our varied schedules—and those of our locations. Needless to say, this style of guerilla film making takes a lot longer than a straight-through shoot, but what can you do? It also necessitated a revolving crew. We did have one constant, our phenomenal cinematographer, Dale Obert, who truly made our digital video look like film.

Roughly five months later, we had completed the four shorts except for a few random pick-up shots. But we had barely begun to think about production on the bookstore sequence, let alone cast it. Knowing that attaching a name would greatly enhance our marketability, we put a casting notice out via Breakdown Services, the same service used by all the major studios and television networks to solicit submissions from agents and managers.

We were keeping our fingers crossed that the casting notice might resonate with an agent or manager. Since actor's reps work off commission, they are rarely motivated to submit their high-earning name clients to ultra-low-budget films that won't make them much money.

Enter Adam West. The breakdown caught the eye of Adam West's agent and she submitted his headshot. We sent her the script; she liked it and passed it on to Adam, who also liked it! (Later, on set, Adam would pull me aside and tell me that he loved my words. What a compliment!)

With actor and location, we were set (no pun intended). Since the bookstore was all the way out in Riverside County and since we wanted to be fully professional around Mr. West, we all took off work and put the crew up in a hotel for the week.

By this time it was fall, fire season in Southern California, and the worst fire raging was in Riverside County, only a few miles from where we were supposed to shoot. At first we were afraid that we might have to postpone production, but the fire changed turned away from us at the last moment. Standing outdoors was absolutely surreal. The clouds and smoke and pollution in the air reflected the light from the flames, bathing everything in an eerie orange glow. A burnt smell perpetually wafted through the air. And it snowed! Ash, that is. Tiny particles of ash rained down upon us almost the entire week, and anyone wearing a dark shirt quickly looked like he or she had the world's worst case of dandruff.

It was strangely appropriate for the film. Fortunately for our cast and crew, we were mostly shooting interiors, so they didn't have to deal with this Dali-esque scene constantly.

After the bookstore shoot, we quickly grabbed our pick-ups and production was complete—ten months from conception. We spent the rest of 2003 interviewing for our post-production team, aiming to start that phase at the beginning of 2004. We had wisely budgeted a lot of money for post, which let us hire a top-notch team. Too many low-budget indies throw all their money into principal photography. With no finishing the funds, their movies end up looking really crappy... if they are ever completed at all.

Warren Bowman, our skilled editor, got the ball rolling, constructing a cohesive whole from our countless hours of footage. As soon as he had cut enough with which the rest of the team could work, in came our masterful sound designers, Michelle Garuik and Sangtar Heer of Grind Music and Sound, and composer, David James Nielsen. It was exciting to watch all these various elements coming together simultaneously. By the time we were done we had an amazing 5.1-channel mix that included a full score, much of which was played by an actual orchestra, not a synthesizer—a true rarity for a film of our scale.

Our one-time gaffer (head electrician), Matthew Talesfore, designed the visual effects. I forget the total number of VFX shots in *Tales From Beyond*, but there were 27 in “Life Replay” alone! Way back when we were planning, we had intended to use cuts and editing to simulate the effects. Doing so would have been a lot cheaper, but ambition took over. The proof is on the screen that the expense was well worth it—everything sells so much better when you see it in frame!



The funny thing is, as the time taken grows longer, the story itself becomes shorter. Finding distribution is largely a waiting game, sending lots of mailings to festivals, producer's reps and distributors, then waiting to hear back from them. It's an ongoing process, but not very glamorous—not much to tell! *Tales From Beyond* ended up playing five festivals (Temecula Valley International Film Festival, Great Lakes Film Festival, Big Mini-DV Film Festival, ShockerFest and ShriekFest), winning awards at two of them (Best Fantasy Feature at ShockerFest and Best Science-Fiction Feature at ShriekFest—on the same night, no less!).

The festival play and victories gave us enough ammunition to land Strategic Film Partners as our producer's reps in mid-2005. Although we still pursued distribution opportunities on our own, the

majority of the work now laid with them. It would take almost another year before Strategic could hook us up with Anthem Pictures, an established DVD authoring and manufacturing company that had recently entered the distribution realm. A summer of negotiating later, and we finally had a deal, 3³/₄ years after we came up with our original idea. Appropriately enough, just in time for Halloween.

So cheap, good, fast... two out of three ain't bad.

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