

"I CREWED FOR LARRY COHEN" (1)

An Exposé transcribed directly from  
the Private Files of John H. Dorr.  
(some more personal notations deleted).

NOW IT CAN BE TOLD!

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Thursday, 19 April 1973:

What a surprise! At 9:00 AM, get a call from Alex Van Der Kar (2) asking if I want an 8-week script supervising job. He hands the phone to Larry Cohen (who made BLACK CAESAR), who offers me \$250/week after I ask for \$300. And I start today! Shooting actually started yesterday. I get to the set - Cohen's house in Coldwater Canyon - by 10:30 with my stop watch, pens, and a make-shift notebook, in time for the first shot of the day. It is called IT'S ALIVE and is a real exploitation movie about a woman who gives birth to a monster. Cohen is not your most agreeable sort, insecure and neurotic; but hopefully I will avoid getting fired. Turns out he is making two 4-week movies back-to-back. He shoots sloppily with long, complicated masters and then simple coverage, counting on only a certain amount to match. "It won't matter; no one will notice" is the

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- (1). The author had a brief career in the early 1970's as script supervisor on several non-union, low budget Hollywood exploitation pictures.
  - (2). Alex Van Der Kar - a veteran soundman with whom the author had worked on 2 earlier productions (MESSIAH OF EVIL and THE PRISONER). Van Der Kar was known for his bad puns and militant vegetarianism.

word of the day on continuity. Feel rather at home and professional in my job, which is a change from the usual first day on the set. Typical long day of shooting - until 9:00 PM.

Friday, 20 April 1973:

Up at 6:30 AM for an 8:00 AM call at Community Hospital in the San Fernando Valley, where we shoot over 10 pages of script at a ridiculous speed, complete with unprepared technical sloppiness - at the director's insistence. I seem to be getting along with the director and am very cooperative. But I certainly sympathize with the various technicians whose reputations are jeopardized by working under these conditions. (3) The story is a direct plagiarized cross between ROSEMARY'S BABY and BEN.

Saturday, 21 April 1973:

8:00 AM to 7:00 PM work day, again at Community Hospital in the Valley. We shoot all day in the maternity ward. We all have to put on surgeon's masks and gowns to work in the sterilized delivery room - where we stage a mass killing by the infant baby/monster, including blood all over the place and some broken medical equipment. As soon as the room is cleaned up, a woman has a real baby there - which we see moments later in the nursery. This production

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(3). It turned out that no reputations were harmed, as none of the crew received screen credit on the completed picture.

hires no usual extras, but grabs anyone who is around - including all the doctors and nurses, friends, the crew. One guy even played 2 roles in the same sequence. If anyone complains about what the director is asking him to do (for technical reasons), Larry Cohen "offers" to shoot it "both ways" - which of course ends the discussion because we are already working too long each day. The director apparently has no formal interests or pretensions; his methods are as fast as possible, everything to be saved in the editing.

Sunday, 22 April 1973:

A day off. Spend the afternoon typing up script notes.

Monday, 23 April 1973:

Call is for 12:00 noon at the same hospital, but it turns out today we are shooting a different picture: the sequel to BLACK CAESAR, starring Fred Williamson,<sup>(4)</sup> some of which has already been shot in New York. But there is no script, which complicates my job a bit. In the evening, we shoot in a restaurant in West L.A. Larry Cohen obviously puts more care into this picture than into IT'S ALIVE. Cohen's wife turns out to be a vegetarian!

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(4). This picture was released in 1974 by American International under the title: HELL UP IN HARLEM.

Tuesday, 24 April 1973:

A rather easy going day of shooting at Larry Cohen's house, where 4 different locations are faked, including the interior of a Harlem church, complete with a huge wooden cross under which D'Urville Martin delivers his "sermons". This production is quite a lesson in low budget techniques; whenever a new set is needed, they redecorate another room. We are still working without a script, largely improvising as we go along. It is one of my duties to write down this improvised dialogue, then type it up so that Larry Cohen will have pages of script to turn into A.I.P. Larry Cohen tells me that I am doing a good job and that he appreciates it.

Wednesday, 25 April 1973:

Faking lots of close-ups of Fred Williamson to match long shots already shot in New York - things like extreme low angles shot such that only sky appears in the background (that the color of L.A. sky in no way matches the established New York sky does not seem to bother anyone). Pay day, but I end up with only \$161 take home because I only worked 5 of 6 production days last week, and taxes are outrageous.

Thursday, 26 April 1973:

Tonight is stunt night, which means 2-camera simultaneous coverage of fights and falls - and a lot of work for me to keep up with. Some sort of black commando raid staged on the open staircase at Larry Cohen's house. Exhausting.

Friday, 27 April 1973:

An easy day: from 2:00 PM to 2:00 AM. Larry Cohen is turning into a Jerry Lewis sort, clowning around constantly, doing imitations, etc. And some of the scenes are beginning to work out rather well, although his mise-en-scene is anything but original. But, as he has said, he is an editor. He shoots a lot of footage and then models it down into a movie. His sense of entertainment has a very ordinary feeling to it, but there is a real spirit to the undertaking. That is, I think he really enjoys making movies, playing with all the oldest cliches - pure melodrama. While a scene is playing, he is genuinely excited, transferring his energy to the proceedings. His Black Caesar character is pathetic in his macho violent revenge ethic, and Cohen knows it - pitting Caesar against love of family and God. Since the world is corrupt, Caesar's reactions to the world are not inappropriate, or so Cohen seems to be saying.

Saturday, 28 April 1973:

A pleasant day, working from 2:00 PM to 2:00 AM. The crew, of course, continues to complain and mutiny; but that seems to be the lot of crews on this sort of production. Larry Cohen says that he enjoys the writing and editing, but that the shooting of the film is pure labor. I continue to be amazed at the degree to which he fashions his story around the questions of God and family. It seems a very personal film by a man who has no faith, yet somehow realizes that faith is the direction to go, although he sees only hypocrisy and deception in all traditional practices of

religion. Also, his faith in the family as the only reality and how, even here, the world is in a lot of trouble. I now have 2 days off - as tomorrow they are shooting with a minimal crew, grabbing scenes (without a permit, I assume) at L.A. International Airport. Then Monday is our official day off.

Tuesday, 1 May 1973:

Back to work, returning to shooting IT'S ALIVE again. A relatively pleasant day. The baby/monster makes its first appearance. It is a very well done life-size model created by a young special effects guy. It has the torso of a baby, but muscular arms, claws for fingers, and fangs.

Wednesday, 2 May 1973:

Payday - but a disappointment. Only paid for 5 days work - accurate, but not very ethical considering we are worked over the agreed upon 12 hours daily.

Thursday, 3 May 1973:

It becomes increasingly clear the large degree to which this crew is being exploited. It is now probable that we will have only 2 more weeks of work - a total of 4 weeks, whereas we were originally told 8 weeks. Tonight we work until 1:00 AM - a total of 15 hours.

Friday, 4 May 1973:

A killer of a day in the sewer tunnels of downtown L.A. - a fascinating place, but I just wasn't prepared - no warm clothes and a digestive system that wanted to get rid of some waste so badly that I was doubled over with stomach cramps and literally no place to go (ironic in the middle of the sewers). Riding on the back of the camera truck through the tunnels - trucking shots of police cars driving through the dark tunnels illuminated only by headlights and the red flashes from the revolving lights on the top of the police cars. Meanwhile, the baby monster lurks in the shadows while John Ryan (playing the monster's father) tries to coax it out of hiding. The idea is that even though the baby monster has killed many, it attacks more out of fear than malice; and the compassion of paternal instinct outweighs revulsion. All to the constant drip, drip, drip of the clammy sewers.

Saturday, 5 May 1973:

Second day in L.A.'s drainage system, but I feel a lot better. The setting is certainly a good one, with lots of spectacular bridges and concrete. We do the final scene of the picture. The police get John Ryan to reveal the baby monster (which he was concealing under his rain coat); and they blast it to smithereens in the kind of over-kill that is geared to make you hate police and feel sympathy for the baby. After all, this monster was the innocent victim of misguided human tampering with genetics - a sort of Thalidomide case. When the generator runs out of gas,

closing down the day's shoot after only one take of the crucial final shot, Larry Cohen is resigned. He says: "That take must have been alright for God. So if we can't get the generator going again, that must be the take we were meant to use." This is the cosmic accident theory of filmmaking and shows why Cohen is not worried about technical perfection. He is confident that accidents work to the good of the picture. Cohen is arrogant, but sympathetic.

Monday, 7 May 1973:

Back to work after a day off. It now appears that the job will last longer than I had come to guess (but then, trying to outguess what is going on in Larry Cohen's scheming mind is surely folly). It is a slow day, with the crew now bitter and self-pitying and quick to jump on any excuse to feel maltreated and threaten mutiny. Larry Cohen has trouble taking these grievances very seriously. This is a one man show: Larry Cohen against the world. His only trusted allies are his wife and his friend Jim Dixon (who is associate producer and plays multiple acting roles in both films - whenever an extra body is needed). Larry Cohen has no time to worry about the amenities, like providing decent meals for this crew of ingrates. Dinner is a disastrous order of cold pizzas and nothing more. Consequently, there is more grumbling about working a half hour overtime tonight than any night last week when we went 2-3 hours overtime. This overlay of ill will can be quite boring. Everyone is very self-righteous about it.

Tuesday, 8 May 1973:

The growing Watergate scandal is the topic of much conversation, as everyone relishes seeing the mighty fall. Larry Cohen is also in for his share of hard knocks. Word has it that the mother of the child actor in IT'S ALIVE is taking out some sort of law suit against Cohen charging mistreatment of a minor - Sharon Farrell slapped the kid to get a reaction out of him. (As I recall the incident, it seemed like a good professional lesson for the boy - whose face otherwise registered nothing but over-fed insipidity. In the context, it seemed like a perfectly reasonable thing to do - if you are the sort that believes that movies are eternal and a slap in the face lasts only a second). Perhaps a bit humbled by the law suit, Larry pushed less strenuously today - although Pat, the camera operator, has been fired and replaced. He was sort of the principal spokesperson behind various mutiny movements in the past few days.

Wednesday, 9 May 1973:

"Surrounded by assassins," has become Larry Cohen's credo, as someone on the crew is sabotaging the production by calling unions and reporting unfair practices, calling the fire department regarding permits, and tipping the trades about unethical treatment of a minor. The word is that if this harrassment keeps up, the whole crew will be fired. Night shooting is wierd: bad vibes shooting in an antiseptic Century City highrise, supper at the absurdly posh Century Plaza Hotel.

Thursday, 10 May 1973:

Night shooting at Van Ness Grade School - a wonderful location in a totally mixed-bag ethnic neighborhood that should give the film a feeling of authenticity that no set decorator could achieve (not that there is any set decorator on this picture anyway). The lack of communication between producer and crew continues, as the crew is late returning from supper break --- and drunk. The director's wife says that this only proves that "Good guys finish last." You see, at her advice, Larry Cohen has done less yelling lately - and this is the thanks he gets!

Friday, 11 May 1973:

Work 4:00 PM to 4:00 AM at Van Ness Grade School again. The idea is that the baby/monster is prowling around the empty classroom looking for his brother. The cops arrive en masse, but the monster escapes.

Saturday, 12 May 1973:

Back to Community Hospital in 'Ho. Hollywood, and now it appears that production will end for sure next week - as we are done with all the dialogue sequences in IT'S ALIVE. All that are left are the baby/monster attacks. Lots of police run-bys through the hospital corridors - first for IT'S ALIVE, then for the BLACK CAESAR sequel, as the black commandoes engineer Fred Williamson's escape from the hospital. Larry Cohen's improvised action sequences are a wonder to behold and the terror of actors and crew alike. He will

start off shooting a more or less planned bit of action, then leave the camera rolling while he yells out new instructions to his unsuspecting actors. I am sorry that I have not been able to become a friend to Larry, as I think he would have welcomed an ally; but the situation never seemed to present itself - or else the chemistry was wrong. Anyway, he has treated me affectionately.

Monday, 14 May 1973:

Production ends tomorrow. Today is an easy day, doing stair scenes, close-ups of light switches and the like - non-dialogue elements to be used in suspense scenes. The Cohen's pet poodle stands in for the baby/monster moving under a blanket in the baby's crib. We finish with the principal actors: Sharon Farrell and John Ryan. Finally, in these last days, a friendly and casual atmosphere is taking over the production. The director's wife bought me a special dinner - a papaya. They mean well.

Tuesday, 15 May 1973:

Turns out we will work one day more. Everyone is sort of happy-go-lucky today: singing, telling jokes and stories, doing imitations and accents. Everyone on a movie crew is a ham at heart.

Wednesday, 16 May 1973:

Every night, Larry Cohen says: "Now we'll just get this shot and then we'll go home." He then proceeds to think up 3-4 additional shots, always claiming each is the last. The same appears to be true regarding the number of working days left. Production was originally going to end Tuesday, then today, and now tomorrow. Today, we shoot mostly POV shots through the eyes of the baby/monster as it crawls along the livingroom floor, under chairs, etc. "Some of the best shots in the film," says Larry. "It's always better when you get rid of the actors."

Thursday, 17 May 1973:

Finally, the last day of production on IT'S ALIVE for Larry Cohen's Larco Productions. I end up with a couple prospects for future work by exchanging phone numbers with crew members. William Wellman Jr. (a personal friend of Cohen) plays a character part. Larry is forced to be particularly reasonable today because a social worker is on the set to supervise the treatment of our child actor. The baby/monster attacks a milkman in the back of his milk truck. Lots of white milk, mixed with red blood, flows out the back of the truck, down the hill, and into the gutter.

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