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## Schlock Redux Matinee Director Joe Dante Loves The Hokey Nostalgia Of B-movie Thrillers.

February 14, 1993 | By BILL KELLEY, Special to the Sun-Sentinel

Joe Dante got his start in the movies 20 years ago by making the kinds of low-budget thrillers that kept Florida's drive-ins thriving for decades.

Now Dante, who matured into a ``name`` Hollywood director with such hits as Gremlins and The Howling, has made the quintessential Florida movie: Matinee, starring John Goodman.

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Matinee returns Dante not only to the early years of his moviemaking career, but the earlier days of his moviegoining youth. The cornerstone of the \$13 million comedy is the premiere of a low-budget B-movie at Key West's famed Strand Theater.

``Everyone makes movies in Florida now -- it has become a major filmmaking center -- but I wanted to do something different,`` Dante says. ``This is the kind of film that might have been shot in Florida 30 or 35 years ago, when South Florida was kind of the B-movie capital of the country.

``We shot on location in Key West and Cocoa Beach and also at Universal Studios in Orlando. But Matinee is very much in the spirit of those great old horror and science fiction films. And the Florida we show in Matinee is the Florida of 1962 . . . for obvious reasons.``

The principal reason is that Matinee is set during the Cuban missile crisis. But that's getting ahead of the story.

Lurking hilariously within Matinee is Mant! (``half man ... half ant ... all terror!``), the movie-within-a-movie that every kid in Key West goes to see at the climax of Dante's coming-of-age romance. Comedy veteran Goodman portrays the larger-than-life producer-director of Mante!

To say that nobody in Hollywood makes movie quite like Dante, is, to put it mildly, an understatement. In 1984, Dante's comic horror film, Gremlins, juxtaposed suburban sweetness and graphic gore so alarmingly that it helped necessitate the creation of the PG-13 rating.

With Matinee, which Dante shot entirely in Florida last spring, the indefatigable director has left out the gore ... and found a way to blend teen-agers, first love, monster movies, a Hollywood B-movie producer and the Cuban missile crisis, all in the same film.

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Says Dante, “Matinee could not have been set in any state but Florida, or the Cuban missile crisis tie-in wouldn’t have had the same immediacy.

“It’s set in Key West to get us as close as possible to Cuba, 90 miles away,” adds Dante, who was 15 when the epochal showdown occurred involving President John F. Kennedy, the Soviet Union and Fidel Castro.

“The Keys normally are used in movies to convey a certain literary allure. We don’t get into any of that. There’s no reference to Ernest Hemingway -- none of the predictable stuff. Why? Because it wouldn’t have mattered to a 15-year-old kid.”

Instead, the slightly bohemian, distinctly heterosexual Key West of Matinee is dubbed by one of its high school characters “the make-out capital of the world,” even as the superpower standoff looms on all sides.

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Dante and his collaborators did not sugarcoat the film’s depiction of early ‘60s Florida. “We did a lot of research, and there are authentic re-creations of everything from newspapers of the time to streets that look just as they did in 1962,” says the director.

Floridians will spot many Key West landmarks (including Duval Street and other recognizable thoroughfares), some of them painstakingly redressed on actual locations and others duplicated on Universal Studios’ outdoor lot in Orlando.

The Central Florida town of Cocoa Beach (“which I guess hasn’t changed much since 1962,” observes Dante) stands in as the Key West of 1962 for certain outdoor scenes where the Key West of today has simply grown up too much over the past 30 years.

A movie like this needs a human anchor, of course, and Matinee has a king-size one. Matinee provides Goodman, who plays schlock-movie mogul Lawrence Woolsey, with his first great solo starring vehicle.

Goodman and co-star Cathy Moriarty appear in both Matinee and Mant!, the engagingly cheesy, black-and-white Woolsey International Pictures monster opus screened for eager Key West teen-agers at the climax of Matinee.

“I’ve wanted to do Matinee for about four years,” says Dante. “But every studio turned us down and we couldn’t get the financing.”

Finally, Dante and his producer, Michael Finnell, raised the money independently. They were about to begin shooting early in 1992 when, says Dante, “There was a group of investors from Europe who were putting up a big chunk of the budget ... and they turned out not to have the money.”

A nervous Dante went to Universal Pictures.

“I met with (production chief) Tom Pollock to see if he’d come across with the money so we could make our movie,” Dante recalls. “He went out of the room for about 20 minutes, then came back and said, ‘Well, passion has won out over logic.’ He gave us the money.”

Universal supplied the remaining share of Matinee’s \$13 million budget, and also delivered Goodman to the picture. (Goodman, the Emmy-winning co-star of ABC’s Roseanne series, has a movie deal with Universal.)

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