



TOUR OF HOLMES

CHICAGO NATIVE AND INDIE FILMMAKER JOHN BOROWSKI IS BRINGING ONE OF THE WINDY CITY'S DARKEST CHARACTERS TO LIGHT. BY KARL J. PALOUCEK

Chicago filmmaker John Borowski isn't sure why so few remember the chilling case of one-time Chicago resident Dr. H.H. Holmes, but he's devoted three years of labor and resources to producing a documentary film about the man that few viewers will be able to

forget. Just in time for the 1893 Chicago World's Fair, Holmes (born Herman Mudgett) managed to build a castle of sorts at the intersection of 63rd and Wallace on the South Side. He operated it as a hotel, taking in guests who were in town for the fair. But



Dr. H.H. Holmes turned Chicago's 1893 World's Fair into a playground for death.

unbeknownst to his customers, his lodgings were equipped with a bit more than just the standard amenities: Holmes had cleverly managed to install vats of acid, quicklime pits, torture devices, a dissecting table and a fully operational crematorium in his hotel without any of his various building contractors suspecting his plans. By the time he was found out, Holmes had dispatched an unknown number — some estimates say more than 200 — of victims, subsequently selling their skeletons to medical schools and other institutions.

Borowski first considered the Holmes story for a film when he discovered the case while researching Chicago history at Columbia

College. But he delayed the project, knowing there would be more than gore to the story. "It's not just murder, castle, horror," he says as we talk to him at his home/studio. "Here is a highly intelligent man graduating from medical school and carefully thinking out and designing this building for the purpose of getting rid of bodies. He knew this all the way from the beginning."

In addition to his narration (voiced by Tony Jay, notable for his work on several Disney films, including *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*) and interviews with other experts, Borowski decided upon a certain number of reenactments. "Initially when I did the castle sequence, I just had photographs," he says. "But I knew that I wasn't going to be able to get away with that. After a hundred years, I knew that people were going to want to see something." All the same, Borowski shows he has the wisdom to know what it really takes to convince an audience, using the lens like a magician uses sleight-of-hand. "It's not what you see, it's what you don't see. I had a fake wall built," he says, pointing from his desk into his living room. "Thank God for high ceilings." Using little more than clever lighting, period wallpaper, well-researched costumes and props, Borowski brought the scenes in the deathly hotel's hallways into vivid view.

Other scenes had to be shot on location. To get the raw, exposed-brick feel of the castle's "dungeon," Borowski took his camera and crew down into the depths of the not-so-sinister Come Back Inn on Lake Street. And the crematorium seen in the film actually is the crematorium of the Sax-Tiedemann Funeral Home in Franklin Park. "They had just



John Borowski gets to the marrow of a scene during filming.



Yet another movie star who is thin as a skeleton.

cremated someone before that, too," he says, also recalling his shock when the facility's operator told him, "I kept the ashes in for effect." "I'm like, 'Oh, man. I didn't need that!'" Despite the grisly subject matter, Borowski received an amazing amount of public support while shooting on-site. "Usually, it's either one way or another. People are like, 'No way!' or they're happy to do it — usually more than happy to do it," he says.

As we spoke, Borowski had nearly finished the film. With the recent success of Erik Larson's telling of the Holmes tale, *The Devil in the White City: Murder, Magic and Madness at the Fair That Changed America*, his timing couldn't be better. Interest in Borowski's website — www.hhholmesthefilm.com, where he plans to issue the film on DVD — has blossomed in the last few months, and as he counts down to the day of its release, he can rest easy that he has provided the world with an articulate answer to his own oft-repeated question, "Who was H.H. Holmes?"

TOP 5 PROFILES

1. Models: The Real Skinny

Follow four women as they try to make it in the fashion industry. **A&E** (May 9)

2. Martha Inc.: The Martha Stewart Story

From her humble working-class beginnings to becoming America's richest — and most controversial — self-made businesswoman. **NBC** (May 11)



Eco-Challenge: Fiji

3. Perfect Babies: Babies by Design

Choose your baby's gender, size, hair color and more — have we gone too far? **TLC** (May 12)

4. Eco-Challenge: Fiji

Out of 81 teams, 10 will cross the finish line in the world's toughest expedition race. **USA Network** (May 5-8)

5. Hypnotized: The Paul McKenna Show

Acclaimed British hypnotist Paul McKenna helps us understand the power of hypnosis on phobias. **WE** (May 14)