

40 YEARS OF TROMA- MORE THAN MEETS THE BILE

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AMERICAN
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PRESENTS



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Although deep in the underground, Troma has left an enormous footprint on the landscape of movie history. Introducing Lloyd Kaufman's book, *Sell Your Own Damn Movie!* (itself an effort to encourage new filmmakers), Stan Lee notes, "Lloyd's body of work has now proven to be a seminal influence on film today. Just look at any film created by the likes of Quentin Tarantino, Takashi Miike, Peter Jackson, Eli Roth, Gasper Noe and James Gunn, to name a few, and you are likely watching a film influenced by *Class of Nuke 'Em High*, *Tromeo & Juliet*, or *Citizen Toxie*."

Kaufman makes movies like a chameleon in a Cuisinart. His films relentlessly move through moods and genres with stream-of-consciousness logic, shifting from heartfelt sentimentality to cartoonish ultra-violence and back without warning. A collage of styles are assembled toward a cumulative effect, pulling the audience from one mood to another with more finesse than the wilder moments alone might suggest.

Such eclectic moviemaking might seem exhilarating if carefully labeled as Art, yet Kaufman's anarchic work polarizes audiences and critics. While similar filmmakers like Roger Corman and Russ Meyer have gotten recognition for their zero-budget output, Kaufman remains a largely unappreciated underground auteur despite a lively fan base that has remained loyal to him over the decades. In an era of saturation theatrical bookings, *Return to Nuke'Em High Volume One*, the first half of an epic celebration of Troma's 40th anniversary, moves from city to city, one screen at a time, like a carnival.

One reason for this can be found in reviews of this new film. Coverage of Kaufman movies tend to remind one how prosecution agents took notes of Lenny Bruce performances when seeking obscenity charges. In a typical example one agent sat through the act transcribing only "key phrases" that reduced entire routines to what even Bruce admitted was incoherent filth like: "has done it to a chicken," "I was drunk," "Go come in a chicken."

Similarly, in spite of it being selected by the New York Museum of Modern Art for its prestigious "Contenders" series, what press *Return to Nuke'Em High Volume One* manages invariably highlights "mutant penises," "duck rape," "dismemberment," "exploding heads," "buckets of slime," "horrible puns." It's true that all of these elements have been lovingly prepared for the cameras, but the implication in such reviews is that Kaufman has produced nothing in forty years but plotless assemblies of sex, violence and green slime.

ANCHOR BAY FILMS PRESENTS A LLOYD KAUFMAN AND MICHAEL NEIZ TROMA TEAM PRODUCTION



Return to Nuke'Em High Volume 1
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What's missed by this attitude is the whole point of Troma Entertainment, founded in 1974 by Kaufman and partner Michael Herz as an unabashed exploitation production company. At that time, there was still room for low-budget fodder at drive-ins, grind-houses, and street-front theaters, as long as the films had enough graphic sex and/or violence to replace big-ticket stars and production values. Even when Troma films parody such conventions, these elements alone may turn many viewers off.



Troma originally developed an audience with a series of teen sex comedies, beginning with *Squeeze Play*, before Kaufman decided to change course in 1984 with a satire/horror film featuring the monster as the hero. This proved to be one of the most profitable left turns in entertainment since the afternoon soap opera *Dark Shadows* tossed a vampire into the cast and burst into a phenomenon. *The Toxic Avenger* opened the door for many mainstream tongue in cheek comedy/horror films to come in the past 30 years.

The Toxic Avenger begins like any other sex comedy. Nerdy janitor Melvin Junko lusts after the beautiful women patronizing the health club where he works while being tormented by their attractive clique. Any subtle morals about inner beauty have to be taken on the fly, however, as Melvin's persecutors are swiftly revealed as homicidal psychotics, while Melvin transforms into a mutated monster who proves to be less unnerving than his original incarnation.

The fantasy elements of *Toxic Avenger's* premise seemed to open the film up to any possibility, and Kaufman plunged forward in all directions. "Tromaville" was a nod to the small town insularity Preston Sturges parodied in films like "Hail the Conquering Hero." The lead's romance with a blind woman echoes that of Chaplin in *City Lights*, while later "Toxie" films recreated gags from

Buster Keaton films. Toxie could be as wistful as Charlie Brown one moment, then stalking a victim in slasher-film style or reducing enemies to bloody pulp the next.



The wonderful thing holding this mélange of moods and styles together was the relentless pace of jokes propelling the plot, undercutting the extreme nature of material that might otherwise have been too overwhelming to watch. Every turn of the plot is informed by Low Comedy, the stuff of Commedia dell-arte, slapstick, and burlesque... not to mention a child's constant amusement at bodily functions.

Such cartoonish humor ensured that Toxie never lost the audience's sympathy even at his most extreme, yet the violence and comedy were applied so broadly that the combination could outrage as easily as entertain...a definite bonus for those who were entertained by outrageousness.



Both *Toxic Avenger** and its 1986 follow-up *Class of Nuke 'Em High* were able to take liberal use of Troma's already enthusiastic fan base, a contest luring hundreds of extras to a party scene in the latter. Both films, as with later Kaufman efforts like *Poultrygeist*, thus present members of the audience gathered on screen watching the action unfold along with the audience in the theater. He clearly is a fan of Brecht and Warhol.

This integration of observer and observed definitely saves production costs, but also underlines the special connection Troma has with its regular viewers. While other studios might keep a firm line between on-screen talent and ticket-buyers, it seemed like anyone could be in a Troma film, or make a film of their

own that Troma might distribute. Kaufman has only accentuated this DIY ethos over the years with his series of books and videos on filmmaking, expanding on the influence his films already had on emerging directors with more nerve than budget.

Class of Nuke 'Em High returned to Tromaville, consolidating the horror-comedy formula now energizing Troma. After a pre-credit sequence gears the audience for mayhem with the abrupt mutation and meltdown of a nerdy student, the story again settles for a while into the teen comedy mode. Repressed high school students Chrissy and Warren find themselves unable to go all the way until taking a puff from a toxic marijuana joint from the grounds of the nuclear plant next door to their high school.



* Kaufman co-directed *The Toxic Avenger* and many early Troma movies with his partner of 40 years, Michael Herz. Mr. Herz does not appear in public and shuns the media.

Once the characters have consummated their relationship, the film shifts into a surreal cycle of mutation and guilt depicted with the same sort of low-budget scare tactics found in features like *Reefer Madness* or *The Cool and the Crazy*, not to mention numberless classroom films of the baby boomer years.

The story now centers on the increasing antagonism between the young lovers and a second group of mutants known as the Cretins, which reaches a boiling point when Warren inexplicably transforms into a slime-squirting superman reminiscent of the Toxic Avenger. The last twenty minutes of the film are played more or less seriously as the Cretins live out every teenager's fantasy of trashing their high school while Warren has to save Chrissy from them (with the help of Chrissy's mutated fetus) before the building explodes.

As with *The Toxic Avenger*, *Class of Nuke'Em* High goes to far limits even as the good-humored tone of the scenes and the sympathetic relationship between the leads reassures the viewers. Such goofy charisma might not have gotten the films any farther than cult awareness had they not been released on videotape at a period when the major studios refused to license their own catalogs for home use. For a time, Troma and \$1.99 rentals went together, small-scale video shops exposing the studio's comedies to a wide and appreciative audience as well as inspiring sequels and spin-offs. Future mainstream directors were watching, also.

Of course, the home team advantage thus gained ended as soon as the big companies finally entered the pool and claimed all the shelf space in the monolithic video chains that emerged. Troma carried on, but their abrupt loss of visibility now carried the risk of rendering Kaufman a nostalgia act or assuming he reached a creative peak in the 80s.

In 1996, Kaufman collaborated with screenwriter James Gunn on *Tromeo and Juliet*, a surprising art-house hit that brought darker tones to Kaufman's work.





Toxic Avenger and *Nuke'Em High* had featured cheerfully idealistic protagonists defending the good-natured but easily manipulated community of Tromaville from corporate invaders from some sort of big city near New Jersey. *Tromeo's* action takes place in New York City itself, Tromaville invoked only at the end as a refuge from the corruption of the metropolis. Likewise, the two leads find themselves less involved in protecting their fellow citizens than trying to survive the brutality all around them, including that of their friends and family, a theme that will be developed further in *Return to Nuke'Em High Volume One*.

While *Tromeo's* villain Cappy Capulet fits the familiar Troma profile of Evil Corporate Overlord, he also reveals unsettling levels of sadism on a human level. The pursuit of profit that had motivated earlier Kaufman conflicts is broadened to include a deeper sense of generational betrayal, Baby Boomers either failing their children or virtually feeding on them as the younger generation tries to cope with the tainted world left to them.

Nearly a generation later, *Return to Nuke'Em High* (written by Kaufman with Travis Campbell and Derek Dressler) revisits once-wacky Tromaville itself and finds that even that haven of community spirit has developed a darker side as society clenches even further within narrowing economic times.

Stan Lee, who popularized the concept of radioactive mutation way back in 1963 with a non-Troma series called *X-Men*, narrates an opening sequence merging the heyday of Troma films with bells and whistles of the download era. Lee's cameo ends with his eyes glowing in a green "Mutants, we hardly knew ye" fashion, signaling that the transformations to follow will be more carefully defined than before.

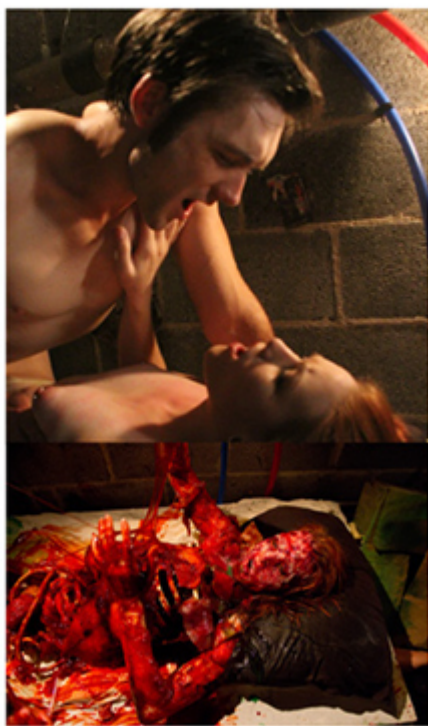


The credit sequence in *Return Volume One* raises the ante of the original's, in which a pair of randy teenagers in a Janitor's office found their sex interrupted by a broken pipe spewing drops of toxic waste. For Volume One, a friendly mutated penis joins the couple before toxic waste rains on the pair. The boy flees while the girl is left to dissolve before our eyes under a stew of blood and green slime. A janitor arrives, notes the residue of flesh and bone remaining, then shrugs and flips through a porn magazine that the characters Eugene and Chrissy will later turn to themselves as a substitute for sexual satisfaction.

Tromaville's nuclear power plant has been replaced by an "organic food" corporation run by Lee Harvey Herzkauf, played by Kaufman himself, though the facility's product remains radioactive waste and shredded teenagers. We can see this unconvincing rebranding as a sign of Troma itself shifting with time while remaining the same, with Kaufman cast as the ultimate maker of mutants (a nod to all the fans who considered themselves changed by his films).

The brief scenes with the character serve as a mini-commentary on Kaufman's varied influences. Herzkauf repeatedly soaks himself with a tumbler of milk, both acknowledging Troma's slapstick roots and adapting Laurel and Hardy's joke structure of a cycle of different actions inevitably leading to the same result. We also see Herzkauf as a Master of the Revels right out of *The Tempest*, former Troma villains reprised here as antic spirits under his control.

Return Volume One replaces Warren and Chrissy with two high school girls, Lauren and Chrissy. Chrissy is introduced avoiding sex with her ostensible boyfriend Eugene, who speaks in the strangled tones of Kirk Douglas having an asthma attack while invariably referring to himself in the third person. The latter trait that might remind viewers of "the Jimmy" from *Seinfeld*, but is employed here to show a guy more interested in talking about sexual exploits than actually having sex, down to providing a play-by-play during the act itself.



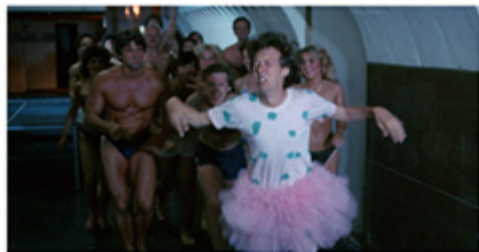


Lauren has an even stranger love life than Chrissy, pledging her love to a pampered duck named Kevin. Her world is shaken when Kevin mysteriously wanders away, and in the sort of silly gag that never seems to be noticed in mentions of Troma films, she begins her search for the missing mallard by sticking one of his feathers in her cap and calling it "Macaroni." However, with Kevin liberated, an alternative for Lauren is presented when she and Chrissy suddenly exchange meaningful glances through iris shots straight out of D.W. Griffith's films.

Kaufman has stated that the two themes of the original *Nuke 'Em* were sexual confusion and drug abuse. In 1986, this was reflected by developing Warren and Chrissy's conflicted feelings about sex and presenting members of the Cretins as cross-dressers,

if not outright hermaphrodites. In *Return Volume One*, the confusion deepens to Lauren and Chrissy having to confront their same-sex attraction within a narrow-minded, hostile community. The darkness of *Tromeo and Juliet* has finally reached the once comforting citizenry of Tromaville itself, the once-comic trials of Melvin Junko now reflected in the real-life tragedies of bullied teenagers.

The ultimate extension of this hostility is personified by the transformation of the school's pathetically nerdy glee club into villainous Cretins. These grotesque characters can easily be regarded by casual viewers as a personification of Troma itself... relentlessly crude, violence-loving thugs. However, that interpretation misses the point that in both versions of the story, the Cretins are the VILLAINS of the piece. In no way are we ever meant to root for them.



When the girl in *Return's* credit sequence is immersed in radioactive slime, her flesh melts away, revealing bone and gut beneath. Students who receive much smaller doses of the same stuff find their social facades disintegrated, revealing their inner natures. One example is a boy genius on the verge of curing all forms of cancer. Having already developed his mental potential to 99.3% of its capacity, it makes sense that this nerd has nowhere to mutate beyond the familiar brain explosion observed throughout Troma films.

The Glee Club represents the Toadies of the world, middle management suck-ups who gleefully assume subservience to authority expecting their conformity to place others below them on the ladder. A side gag in the original *Nuke 'Em* reflects this by mentioning that the Cretins there are the mutated remnants of the school honor society while a hideous, violent Cretin named Gonzo gets a big laugh by declaring, "That's what you get when you're in love with a yuppie." We can take it as a joke because the character looks like a Borneo Wild Man, but the deeper implication is that he still regards himself as trampling his way to the top.

In *Return Volume One*, the inherent resentment and viciousness of the Glee Club is revealed as soon as their mask of humility is stripped away. To underline this, the abysmal howling they consider singing is suddenly replaced by perfect harmony as they finally find their true voices. However, they still remain Toadies who judge victory as whatever they can get away with under the nose of authority, as seen near the end of Volume One when Cretin Rachel gets out of punishment for harassing Chrissy by invoking abstract "rules" to teacher Mr. Chips.

The Cretins' rampage in *Return Volume One* is an excellent example of the hairpin turns in mood that Kaufman likes to create. The gang attacks Lauren with none other than Kevin, who has been innocently munching radioactive waste on his walkabout, driving the duck's head down her throat. (This is the infamous "Duck Rape" implied without further explanation in reviews).providing a play-by-play during the act itself.



Lauren flees with her beloved duck dangling from her mouth as eggs spill from the canard's hindquarters (apparently Kevin is experiencing some sexual confusion of his own), finally finding help from her supposed rival Chrissy. This results in one of the wackier scenes in the film as the two girls attempt to free Kevin from Lauren's jaws. It's impossible to take the duck scene seriously, but we have to take it seriously. Kevin is a symbol of Lauren's misplaced concept of love, which must be removed before she can open her eyes to a genuine relationship.

Once Kevin is finally free, both girls discover he shows the signs of mutation, a condition they're about to experience themselves when radioactive brew at a party brings out their hidden selves. The growing attraction between the pair at the party is genuinely romantic, leading to a torrid love scene subtly interrupted by a Brechtian shift suggesting to the audience that the moment belongs more to the characters themselves than the onlookers.



This sort of pleasure is anathema to the drone-like Cretins, who arrive to literally burn the party to the ground. That night, Lauren and Chrissy reenact a dream sequence from the original *Nuke 'Em* in which the joy of sex is mixed with terror of one's changing body. This time, however, the pair find themselves publically displaying exaggerated genital characteristics as a sign of the empowerment they find in their relationship.

The girls reveal their newfound strength at the stronghold of the Cretins, who are holding a sort of Saturnalia where the former geeks now consider themselves the new authority in town. It's a hollow affair, typified by a tableau of unsuccessful fellatio performed on a guy who seems, like Eugene, more interested in calling a play by play of the action than actually enjoying it. The Cretins are too busy zoning out on drugs to find sexual release, and prove no match for the lovers' revenge for their assault on Lauren. exaggerated genital characteristics as a sign of the empowerment they find in their relationship.

While the girls are left wondering the next morning if their experiences were real, we can see that the wheel-chair-bound Cretin Donatello is left with his arms in casts from the attack. As in the original *Nuke 'Em*, the Cretins now focus on the two leads as primary targets. Rachel momentarily gets the better of Chrissy as the Volume winds down, while Lauren begins to feel an unexpected extension of her previously expressed desire for a baby.

It looks like things are about to get really strange, which is about as consistent at Lloyd Kaufman's films ever get.



But wait, there's more (to coin a phrase). The ongoing history of Troma films is even wider than the upcoming Volume Two of the *Return to Nuke 'Em High* saga. Kaufman's fusion of underground filmmaking, exploitation, and pop culture has opened the door for an entire generation of directors. Some, like Trey Parker and Matt Stone, were specifically discovered by Troma, but the company's legacy has expanded far beyond their own releases.

After leaving mainstream cinema behind, Lloyd Kaufman has now been around long enough for all of us to see elements of Troma resurface in the mainstream. His movies refuse to become museum pieces, however, still nipping at the heels of authority for the amusement of old and new viewers. Have fun watching these wild films.



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