

Feature



Gill-man: The Last Universal Studios Monster

Ed Martinez

A professional makeup artist and long-time "Creature from the Black Lagoon" fan talks about a memorable day with original Creature actor Ben Chapman, and his quest to recreate the iconic costume.

My love affair with the *Creature from the Black Lagoon* started when I was pretty young, maybe ten or twelve years old, when I saw the film for the first time on television. Back then, the local stations would run horror and science fiction movies as marathons. Sometimes they'd have special horror shows with a host like Bob Wilkins of "Creature Features."

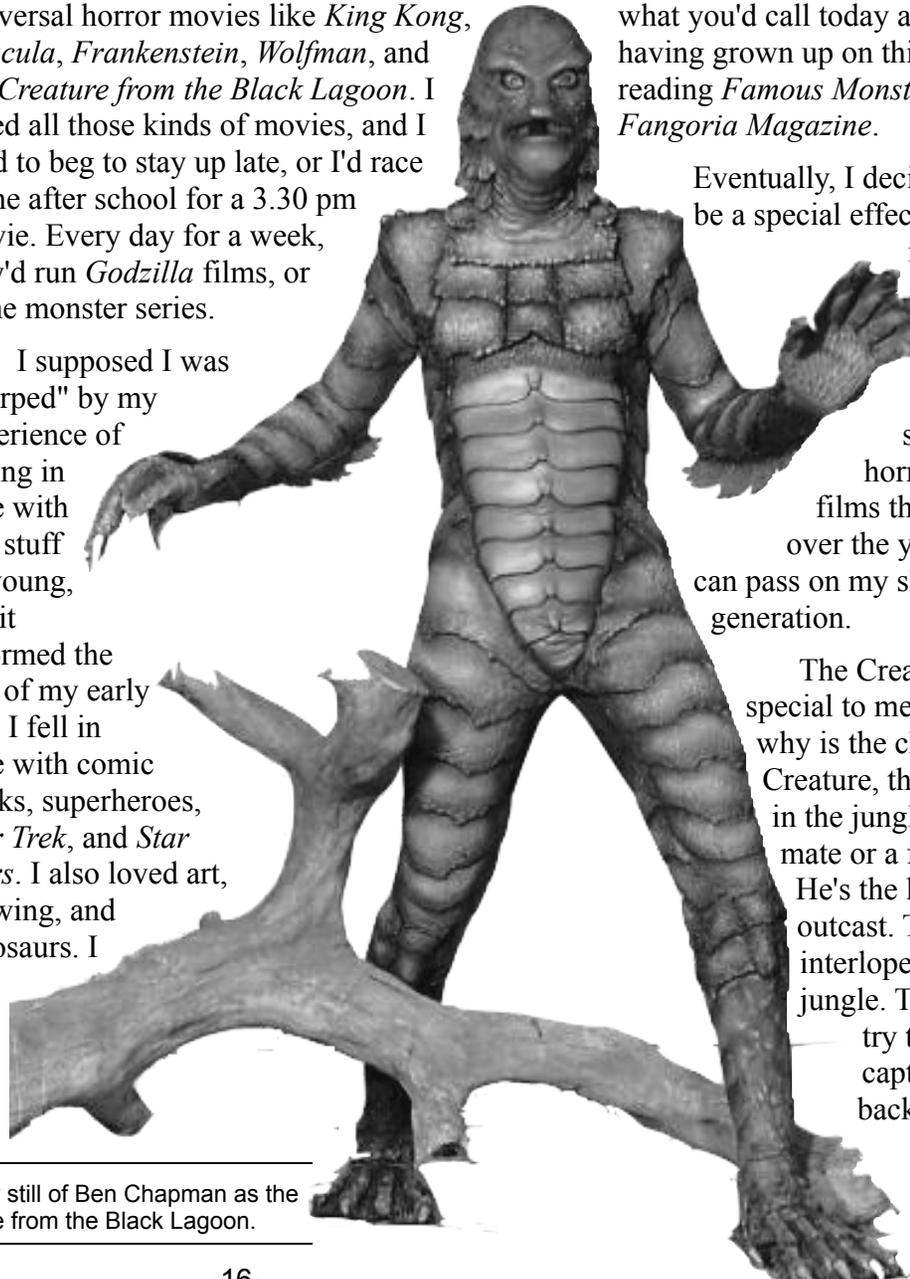
Television stations would buy what they called, "The Universal Monster Package," which contained all the classic

Editors Note

The rare behind-the-scenes photos in this article come from Ed's collection of Creature memorabilia, and from those of other collectors who have generously shared their material with the community.

Universal horror movies like *King Kong*, *Dracula*, *Frankenstein*, *Wolfman*, and the *Creature from the Black Lagoon*. I loved all those kinds of movies, and I used to beg to stay up late, or I'd race home after school for a 3.30 pm movie. Every day for a week, they'd run *Godzilla* films, or some monster series.

I supposed I was "warped" by my experience of falling in love with this stuff so young, but it informed the rest of my early life. I fell in love with comic books, superheroes, *Star Trek*, and *Star Wars*. I also loved art, drawing, and dinosaurs. I was



Publicity still of Ben Chapman as the Creature from the Black Lagoon.

what you'd call today a "monster kid," having grown up on this kind of stuff, and reading *Famous Monsters of Filmland* and *Fangoria Magazine*.

Eventually, I decided that I wanted to be a special effects artist and work in movies, and that's what I do today. I'm now a professional special effects artist and have quite a string of sci-fi and horror films, and action films that I've worked on over the years. I also teach so I can pass on my skills to the next generation.

The Creature has always been special to me. Part of the reason why is the character of the Creature, the fact that he's alone in the jungle; you don't see a mate or a family, or anything. He's the last of his species, an outcast. These people, who are interlopers, come to his jungle. They're invaders, who try to drug him and capture him, so he fights back in the only way he knows how.

When I first watched the Creature movies, I wasn't attuned to male-female relationships, and didn't understand that he was in love with the girl. Once I was older and understood that kind of thing, I figured it out. It's a classic example of the Beauty and the Beast story line, where he might be ugly but he has a heart and cares about this girl. And although she's afraid of him, she also has a soft spot for him, too, because she feels sorry for him.

What happens to him is tragic: he loses the girl, and ends up being killed – or at least he's supposed to have been killed, but then he does come back for two more films. It's a story that's filled with pathos.



Rare color publicity still of the Creature with "Kay Lawrence."

Millicent Patrick's design of the Creature's suit is just gorgeous, it's perfect and flawless. There is something about it that is so iconic that it just reads well on film and the illusion is complete. The way the gills move, and the way the eyes look, and the way he walks toward the camera and opens his mouth is completely believable, you just buy it 100%. In fact, he came to be known as the "[Gill-man](#)" within the studios.

It was such a complete illusion for me at such an early age, that it really effected me, made me have dreams and nightmares. I wanted to study it, learn about it, and figure out how it was made. I made it my job to research it to find out as much as I could about making the film. I also began collecting still photos, model kits, toys, comic books, anything I could find. As a result, I have quite a collection today of Creature memorabilia.

It's just my favorite monster of all time, even over icons like King Kong, and Godzilla. H. R. Giger's *Alien*, and creatures like the *Predator*, owe a great debt of gratitude to the original Creature from the Black Lagoon suit. Without the



Artists in Universal Studios' makeup department working on the Creature costume. Sculptor Chris Mueller is at left, makeup department head Bud Westmore is at right.

designs and the technology that they devised and the techniques they pioneered, there would be no *Alien* or *Predator*.

After years of studying it, I've learned a good deal about how the Creature costume was made, and I always intended someday to complete one of my own. Now that I've reached a level of technical ability, I finally can. Through research, photographs, and reading articles, and with the help of other creature fanatics (like Johnny Gilbert, the "Arizona Gillman"), I discovered a lot of information about how it was built, and have begun to make my own. I haven't completed that task yet, but I'm making a lot of progress, with the help of friends like Daniel Bravo, towards finishing a suit.

Of course, it's very time-consuming and very expensive for just one person. The original suit had an entire team of ten or so

people working full time, cost many thousands of dollars, and had the full resources of the Universal Studios makeup department to create the costume. They had to make more than one full suit, even for the original design that was rejected. This is a common practice so that there would be no delay in filming if there was a tear or a piece of the costume was damaged or failed. They could just swap out a fin, or a head, the entire torso, or whatever they needed

In Oct.2006, I had an amazing experience. Ben Chapman, the man who played the "land" Creature in the first film, was going to be appearing in person at the landmark Castro Theater in San Francisco, along with Julie Adams who played the girl, "Kay Lawrence," in the movie. It was for a [Bay Area Film Events](#) program to run the Creature from the Black Lagoon in 3-D, and have a special Q&A period. They also had



Julie Adams autographs Ed's resin Creature bust.



Interviewer John Stanley with Julie Adams and Ben Chapman.

special dealer tables where Ben and Julie would sign autographs and talk with fans.

I had never met Ben Chapman in person before, nor Julie Adams, so I thought that this was a great opportunity and made sure that I got tickets. The screening was held twice in one day. There was a matinee early in the day, and then another in the early evening. I decided that I'd go down there and have a chance to meet Ben and spend as much time as possible with him. I brought some of my Creature body parts that I was working on, and a resin Creature bust that is a casting of the original land head that Ben wore in the film, for Ben and Julie to autograph.

Ben Chapman was a dream. He's my hero, and here was an opportunity to meet him in person, the man inside the suit, who played the Creature from the Black Lagoon. It was such a very emotional experience for

me, as though the Creature had walked off the screen and was there in person.

It was especially poignant because it was one of his last public appearances. He passed away in February 2008. It was a very sad day when I learned of his passing, but what a wonderful memory of spending this special day with him. I'll cherish and treasure that memory for the rest of my life.

He was elderly to the point where he needed a little help with the stairs to where he and Julie were signing autographs, and onto the stage in the main auditorium for the Q&A session. I made myself available to assist Ben during the day whenever he needed a little help. I sat with him the whole day, shared a small lunch with him, and just listened to all the stories he had to tell.

Of course Julie was there too. She was so gracious and is still a beautiful woman. However, my crush on the girl in the white bathing suit is overshadowed by my real



Ben Chapman autographs Ed's resin Creature bust.

passion, which is the Creature, so I really spent most of my time focusing on Ben. He knew that being the Creature was one of the most important things that ever happened to him, and that it would be the main thing he'd be remembered for.

He loved being the Creature, and loved telling stories, and explaining the mindset and philosophy in the head and the heart of the Creature, as though he knew what the Creature was thinking. He also told about wearing the suit, and other anecdotes.



Chris Mueller sculpting back and dorsal of the Creature. Mueller sculpted the original Creature maquette in clay

For example, they were taking publicity shots in the underwater cave set, with rocks made from plaster of paris. He was supposed to be carrying Julie Adams' unconscious body. As he walked forward, not being able to see well out of the suit, he

accidentally bumped her head on a fake rock. She got a little bit of a cut, and they called the nurse. Nothing serious, but they really played it up for publicity purposes. They stopped and did a whole photo session where Ben is standing there in the full Creature suit looking concerned along with other male actors, the director and the producer. Finally they put a little Band-aid on it, touched it up with some makeup, and just kept going.

He also told me about a discussion with director Jack Arnold about how he should move and

walk. Arnold said that since the Creature is from the water, Ben should kind of slide his feet. The next thing Ben knows, they inserted thin lead weights into the feet, adding about ten pounds to them. It made it very difficult to lift his feet up, so the weights assisted him sliding along as he walked.

Ben lived in Hawaii for most of his life and was also a talented Hawaiian dancer. He actually got his start playing bit parts in movies set in the Hawaiian islands. Ben died in Hawaii, and his family and son continue to run his [website](#) from there.

VC: Did Ben talk about what it's like to put the Creature suit on?

Ed: Ben said that it was a very form-fitting costume, which meant that he could not lose or gain any weight, or change his body during the course of filming. The suit was fashioned just for him, and there were certain things about the way the suit was put on him as he got into it that helped to make it snug in the waist area. There was a corset built in, and assistants laced him in tightly around his mid-section before snapping and zipping him in.

The suit was kind of a second skin, made of a rubber material called foam latex, which is like sponge. The base of the suit was a



Julie Adams gets patched up while concerned Creature looks on.



Stunt actor Rico Browning's Creature costume being fastened. Dorsal fin hides zipper and snaps. Note fingerless gloves on unitard.



Stunt actor Rico Browning donning Creature head. The head also zipped up the back.

thin green unitard over which they attached the foam latex pieces. The unitard had fingerless gloves sewn in that prevented the sleeves from creeping up when he raised his arms. Although it was very hot, the foam latex breathed and was porous, so his sweat would soak through the suit and absorb into the foam latex.



Stunt actor Rico Browning in Florida lagoon used for underwater sequences. Led weights kept him submerged.

This was similar for the man who played the “under-water” Creature, Rico Browning. When Rico went into the water, although the suit absorbed the water like a sponge, it was buoyant and floated on the surface. This made it very difficult for him to stay submerged, so a thin vest with lead weights was made, which he wore under the suit. It acted like a skin-diver's weight belt, and he also had small led weights sewn into his suit.

VC: What kind of paint was used to color the suit?

Ed: At the time (1954) the kind of paint system that was available would "bite" into the surface to the rubber, bond with it, and become part of the rubber. Today, the equivalent of what they were using is a



Publicity still of Millicent Patrick touching up Creature costume. Patrick designed the Creature on paper, and the final look of the suit used in the film.

rubber cement based paint. One of the paint formulas that can be used to create paint jobs on rubber masks and foam latex pieces has rubber cement as one part of the paint base, and then naphtha ([naphthalene](#)) as a solvent.

You mix one part rubber cement and three parts naphtha, making a very thin and watery paint that you can spray through an airbrush. Then you add universal color-tint pigment, the same kind used by paint stores to mix custom colors for latex house paint. The solvent and rubber bonds with the surface of the foam latex, becoming part of the rubber, and cannot be rubbed off.

VC: In the movie, his mouth actually opens and closes. How did they get his jaw to articulate the mask?

That scene uses the land suit worn by Ben Chapman. The mask was sculpted over a plaster bust mold of Ben's head. It fit like it was made for him, because it literally was. The mask was a second skin, with no gap



Creature eyeball insert.

between the inside surface and him, except for a slight separation around the eyes. There were holes for the eyes, and they made plastic eyeball inserts that went into them.

There were several different sizes and types, depending on the scene. If it wasn't a close-up like the one where he opens and closes his mouth, the eyes would have slightly larger holes so he could see better. But for a close-up, they put in plastic eye inserts that didn't have any holes. It looked completely convincing because you couldn't see any part of the human underneath except for his mouth.

His own mouth could open and close the foam latex mouth because it's so conforming and tight around his own face, head and lips. So when he opens his mouth wide, you're seeing down into Ben's own mouth and throat. The illusion is very convincing: it seems like you're looking inside the mouth of the Creature, down deep into the esophagus. You could even see the uvula inside his throat.

VC. That scene also showed his gills moving at the same time.

Ed: Somebody would hold a squeeze bulb from off-camera with a hose a few feet out the back of his suit, and they have these bladders like balloons inside, in-between Ben's skin and the surface of the rubber mask. They could use the squeeze bulb fill



Publicity still of Creature designer Millicent Patrick with molded mask.

these balloons with air and deflate them over and over again. At the same time, Ben was opening and closing his mouth, and it looked like a fish out of water, gulping for air, with the gills flipping and flopping as he moved.

It's very convincing, and it happens very quickly. A few moments on screen is all you need to complete the illusion. With that and all the other things the Creature does in the film you're totally convinced that it's a living, breathing creature.

VC. If Ben Chapman were still with us and he was asked, what one thing would he want us to know about the Creature?

Ed: The main thing he liked to talk about was not the technical aspects of the film, because it was so long ago and he didn't remember as much of those kind of details. He talked with me most about the emotions, the heart-felt outpouring he receives from fans. For him, it just kept on giving, as new generations saw the film and reached out to him. Everybody loves the Creature. Right up to his passing, he received quite a bit of fan mail, and he was constantly asked to appear at conventions, and autograph shows, and to be interviewed.

The things that Ben Chapman really liked about the Creature and his experience being the Creature, is the legacy of all the people it's touched, and the pathos of the Creature's story. He's not just a monster who's there to kill people and be a mindless, evil force. The Creature has a heart, and a soul, and a personality that comes through.

Ben was a very big man, a gentle giant. It was a privilege to meet, and get to know him. That's the legacy of the Creature for him.

(On a side note, I was able to meet Rico Browning, the man who played the underwater, swimming Creature. He told me about his experiences at the [Monsterpalooza](#) convention where I met him. So, I have now met both of the Creatures but that is a story for another day.)



Ed Martinez and Ben Chapman discuss the Creature from the Black Lagoon.

Ed Martinez has taught for many years at the Academy of Cosmetic Arts in Los Gatos, California, and has held many seminars and workshops in addition to teaching at the Academy of Art University San Francisco. One of his early films was the zombie classic "The Dead Pit." He has worked on award-winning music videos, commercials, television shows, and feature films. Projects include "Amityville: A New Generation," "Retardead," "Animal

Planet's Hero Animals," and the vampire film "The Damned" (see [IMDb](#)). He specializes in instructing students on wounds, burns, lacerations and other casualty simulations in addition to old age and prosthetic makeup. He also teaches a special final class on fantasy looks, airbrush body painting, and special effects. Visit him on [FaceBook](#) or contact him by email at edwardamartinez@sbcglobal.net.