

DO YOU DARE VENTURE INTO... THE VIDEO VAULT

Lane Van Ham/ Daily Nebraskan

By Lane Van Ham
Staff Reporter

"Yee-haw! We got us a real blood-n-grits thriller this week! I bet on Robert E. Lee's corpse you'll be crazy for this one. Maybe you'll even be inspired, as I know I was... sniff sniff... hmm, that barbeque is about ready... What can I say? Gore right out and get this! See you all next week... heh-heh-heh!"

The ads screamed: "MADNESS INCARNATE! Brutal... evil... ghastly beyond belief!" It was 1964, a year after the pioneering first "gore" movie, "Blood Feast." "Blood Feast" had been made on \$24,000 and had little as far as plot, but had been a big draw at the box office. Its director, Herschell Gordon Lewis, was looking for another such feature, this time with better production and story, but the same essential attraction: blood.

What he and producer David Friedman came up with was "2,000 Maniacs," the second of his famous gore trilogy (the third would be "Color Me Blood Red," about an artist who paints with... you guessed it!).

The movie opens with one of the coolest theme songs of all-time, "The South's Gonna Rise Again!" while two of the maniacs set up phony detours to get "damnyankees" into their town, Pleasant Valley. There's nothing particularly insidious about that -- except that it reminded me of something that would happen on the "Dukes of Hazzard."

Pleasant Valley, it turns out, is having a Centennial celebration, and they need six Northerners as guests of honor. The mayor explains all this to the confused travellers (two couples travelling together and a woman named Terri Adams who has picked up hitchhiker Tom White) and the obnoxious townfolk laugh at everything he says. What's going on here? They wonder, but decide to stay. We might call this "mistake number one."

As any viewer can tell, things are about to break apart. The mayor and some of the good ol' boys manage to separate one couple (Johnny and Bea), and once Bea's thumb is cut off, the fun has begun. Wa-hoo!

That night, the town is treated to a barbeque that brings new meaning to the phrase "mystery meat," and buxom villager Betsy gets Johnny drunk for the horse race.

As this is going on, Terri and Tom discover the secret behind the town centennial, which was never explained. Nearby, on a commemorative plaque, an inscription tells of six renegade Union soldiers

who wiped out the town 100 years ago. Pleasant Valley, Population 2,000, is inhabited by revenge-crazy maniacs!

I don't want to diminish the importance of this ultimately life-saving discovery, but were they in town they might be able to witness the horse race, as Johnny is drawn and quartered by the town's finest thoroughbreds.

Events for the next day feature a creative barrel roll and the rock judging contest, where a Yankee gal is tied below a huge rock while townfolk throw softballs at a target to make it fall on her (sort of like a dunking booth). After every throw she has to say, "It hasn't fallen yet."

Tom and Terri, by this time, have decided to skip out on this little bash (so to speak) and get a little kid named Billy to show them where Terri's car is hidden. The disappointed maniacs watch their escape, distressed that the much-anticipated axe-throwing contest will never come about.

Justice lovers will probably be disappointed by the ending, where the maniacs get off scot-free: as it turns out, no one has lived in Pleasant Valley since the massacre 100 years ago, and for the past two days, they've been in the company of ghosts! Oooh! They hang a miniature noose Billy had on the rear view mirror as "a souvenir," and drive off into the sunset.

The essential appeal of "2,000 Maniacs" was, of course, blood. Herschell Gordon Lewis says in Re/Search's "Incredibly Strange Films" that "blood is the ultimate symbol. It's the one symbol everyone understands. There is power to blood. It has emotional impact unlike any other on earth."

Yet Lewis uses remarkable restraint compared to today's gore films, so overblown the blood has really ceased to be, dare I say, relevant. For example, when the drawing and quartering scene occurs, all we see is a horse dragging a human arm behind it.

To audiences in the sixties, though, this was a big deal -- a liberation of cinema just as the beat writers were to poetry, The Beatles and Elvis to music, and drugs to

perception. It is clear from Lewis' interviews that, above all in his film-making philosophy, is consideration of the audience.

not mean catering to predictable success and choosing formulas which have proven successful in the past. It means making a movie that will be impressive to those in the theater and not the people who vote for the Oscars.

I doubt that the splatter films of today will hold up in 25 years the same way "2,000 Maniacs" does. We aren't impressed with the minimal blood loss or the obvious mannequin arms. But Lewis succeeded in creating some off the wall character interaction and a silly story that's fun to watch unravel.

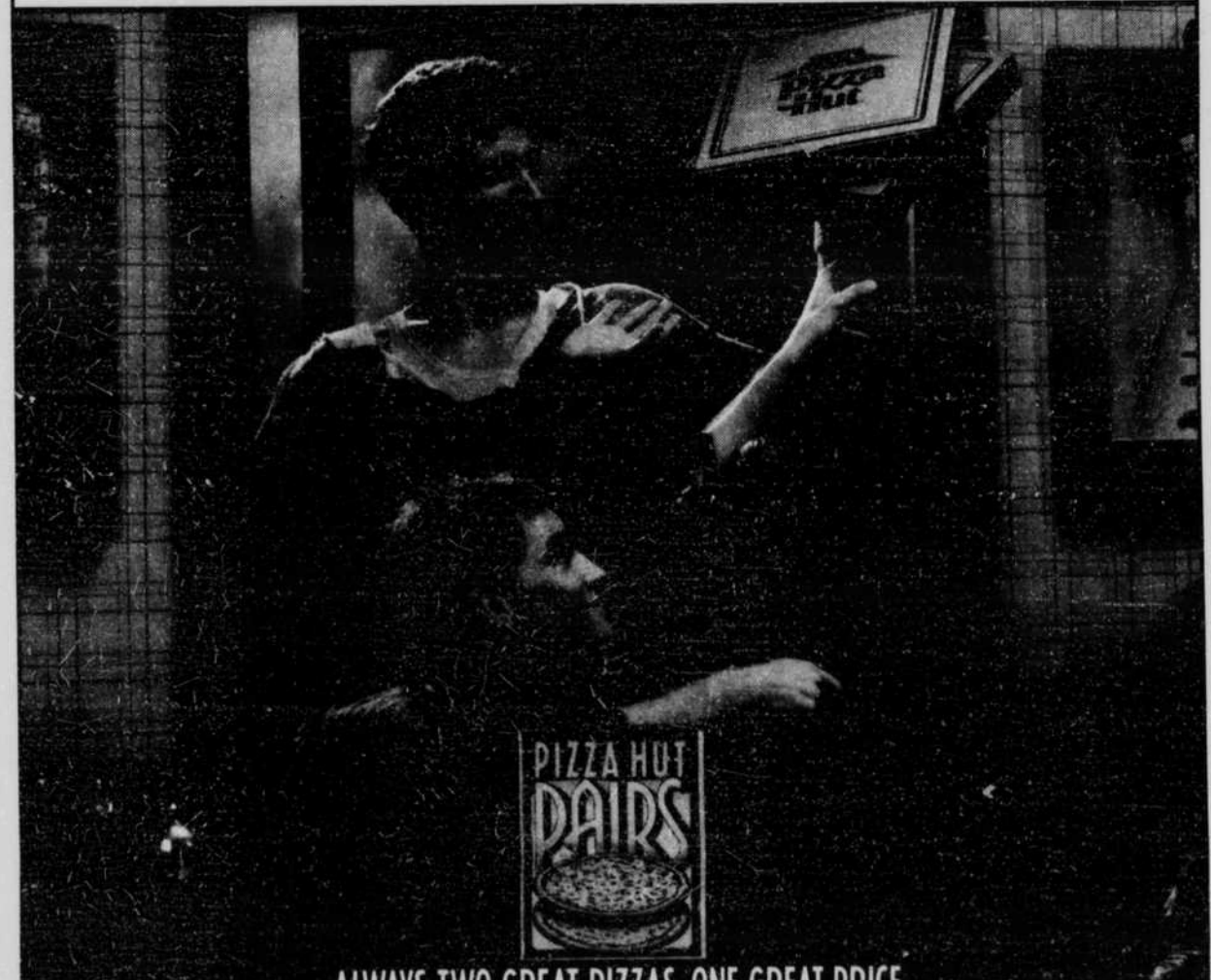
It has gore, psychos, quicksand,

confederate flags, and a cast that will probably remind you of the "Hee-Haw" show with knives. Plus there's the rip-roaring tunes of the "Pleasant Valley Boys," but don't be fooled -- Lewis himself sang the theme song because he didn't want to pay a singer!

"There's a story you should know/From a hundred years ago/ And a hundred years we've waited now to tell./Now the Yankees come along/And they'll listen to this song/And they'll quake in fear to hear this rebel yell/Yee-hoo! Oh, the South's gonna rise again!"

"2,000 Maniacs" is available at several video outlets in Lincoln.

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A complete set of instructions for the first-time smoker.

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