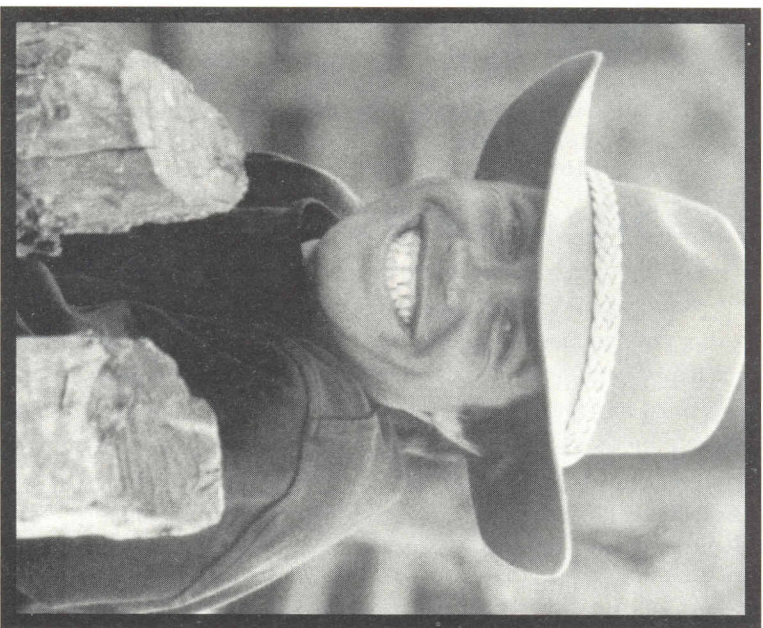


"I seem to take on films that parallel what is going on in my life," says director Ron Underwood, who made his feature film debut on 1990's *Tremors*, the subterranean monster flick starring Kevin Bacon. "I loved the offbeat tone that the script adapted from the '50s monster films I had seen as a kid."

Underwood's inspiration to direct sprang not only from watching his father's photography hobby, but also from watching cinema staples such as *Dr. Zhivago*, *The Graduate*, and *Citizen Kane*. "I would watch these movies and enter an entirely different world," he says. "I was so emotionally involved with the characters and what was going on in their lives, that I knew this was something I wanted to do—I just didn't know how I was going to get into it."

After working on educational films and children's TV for 15 years, Underwood made his break into features with a little help from his friends Brent Maddock and S.S. Wilson, the writers of *Tremors*, who insisted Underwood direct their script. "I was doing educational films and children's TV for so long that I began to get frustrated. It was so repetitious," he recalls. "I can't knock educational filmmaking, though, because once I got into doing features I realized that all of my past work had enabled me to learn the art of filmmaking." Underwood says. "It gave me confidence on the set and helped give me a feeling for what worked and didn't work. The experience helped me to continue making movies once I got started."

Remaining open to change ("because you never know what will lead to what"), Underwood again shifted gears to helm the 1991 hit *City Slickers*. The director recalls seeing a bit of himself in Billy Crystal's middle crisis-ridden cowboy-in-training. "Knowing what the main character was going through made the film incredibly important to me," says Underwood. "I knew exactly what I wanted." One particular scene



Ron Underwood: Bringing it home.

which stands out for Underwood is when Crystal's character brings in the herd. "I had such a particular picture in my mind of what the ranch was supposed to look like, but I couldn't find it anywhere," he says. Using special effects, another passion of his, Underwood and his creative staff made matte paintings of

mountains and scenery which they then combined with footage shot on a Colorado ranch. "Every tool, whether it be sound effects, music, or visual effects, helps tell the story, and I wanted everything used in this film to tell this character's—and my—story."

Another chapter in Underwood's story was written in 1993 with the fantasy-comedy *Heart and Souls*. "I'd just started directing this film when a little girl was killed riding her bike to my house to play with my daughter," he remembers. "The film looked at death in a more positive way, which helped me get through the trauma." If one believes in divine power, it is no coincidence that Underwood's life and film experiences have mirrored each other. But what a foreshadowing for a high-school-kid whose first visit to a film set was during a shoot for *The Poseidon Adventure*. "I was visiting a friend, Harold Stein, who was one of the visual effects cameramen, and I started walking around this set of a ship turned upside down that had tables and chairs and toilet bowls hanging from the ceiling," Underwood recalls. "It all looked so real and so romantic," he says. "I don't think making movies is romantic now, but it can be."

Harold Stein, interestingly, was a cameraman on the original *Mighty Joe Young*, which brings Underwood's story up to date: He's currently heading up the remake. Not willing to reveal how his life imitates art in this case, the director does promise it will be, "an inherently emotional story that has the muscle and strength of an adventure film." Sounds something like his story.

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