

FILM & TV

## Lost Colorado Monster Flick *Curse of the Blue Lights* Plays at Sie FilmCenter

The Pueblo-shot creature-feature brings a local legend to life.

By John Flathman | September 25, 2023



Director John Henry Johnson with crew at the former Tamarack Productions Studios. **John Henry Johnson**

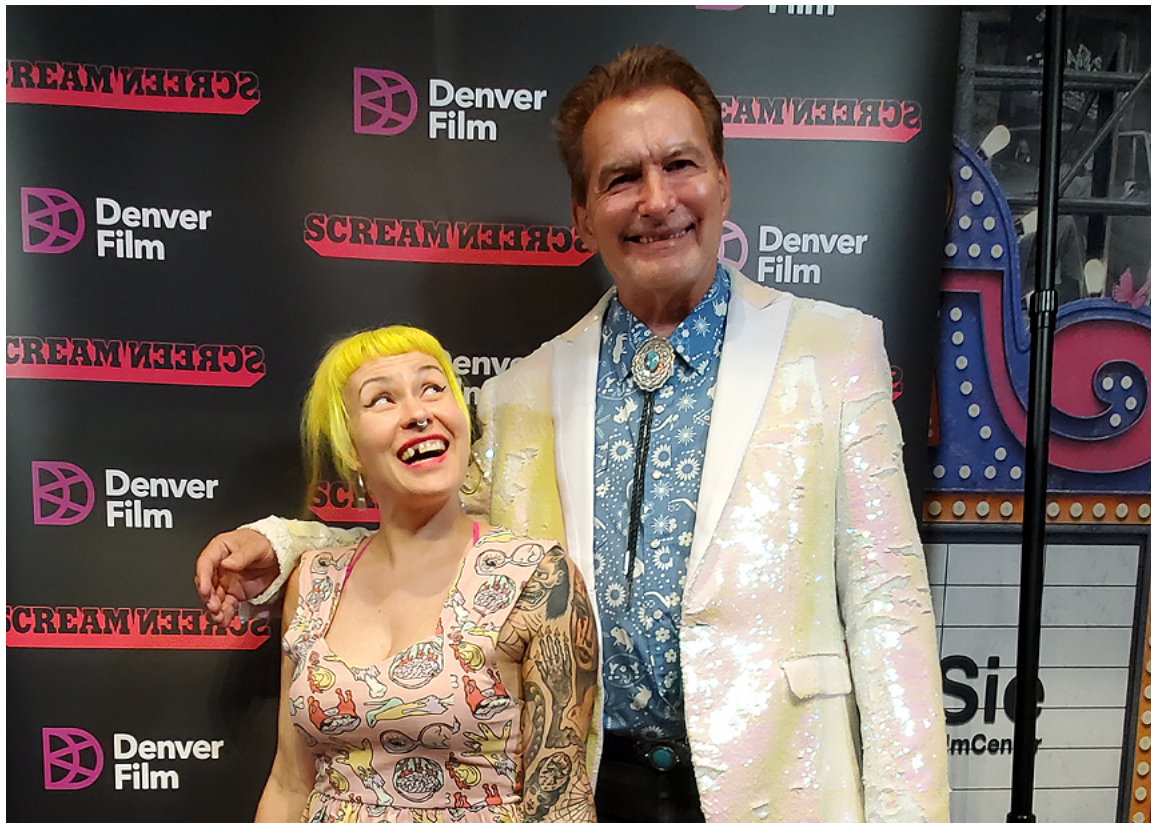
"Blue Lights was a real teenage parking area, west of Pueblo on the Arkansas, where people were rumored to have seen these blue lights," explains history buff and filmmaker John Henry Johnson while discussing the background of his 1988 film *Curse of the Blue Lights*.

"They didn't know what they were, or why they were, or anything else," he continues, "but I thought, 'Well, this is a good start: We'll have teenagers out in the boonies necking.'"

The local legends became the core of the Pueblo-shot horror romp, which plays Saturday, September 30, at the **Sie FilmCenter** as part of the **Scream Screen** series. It's an inventive homegrown creature feature with a little bit of everything – ghouls, monsters, zombies – and it's enjoying renewed interest thanks to a lovingly restored new version released this year by boutique/cult label **Vinegar Syndrome**. Both Johnson, who still lives in Pueblo where he was born and raised, and head of makeup effects Bryan Sisson will be at the Sie for a post-screening Q&A.

"I had actually never heard of it," says Scream Screen creator and host Theresa Mercado, who also manages Vinegar Syndrome's physical media outpost in Denver, **the Archive**. Surprisingly for the veteran programmer, she "wasn't familiar with it at all, and was ashamed, because it is a Colorado-made horror film," Mercado says. "I watched it as soon as I could get my hands on it, and just immediately fell in love with it. [It has] excellent practical effects, excellent makeup effects, and this

is, you could tell, a team of people that did so much with so little money and just really made an effective, spooky, great horror movie."



Scream Screen host Theresa Mercado with Joe Bob Briggs.

Theresa Mercado

The film was directed by Johnson, who also shot, edited and co-wrote it with Sisson, who additionally served as assistant editor and director. By the time they went into production on *Blue Lights*, Johnson was something of a local legend himself, having independently produced two earlier films based on area history through his company Tamarack Productions: 1981's *Damon Runyon's Pueblo* and 1984's *Zebulon Pike and the Blue Mountains*. He spent a good deal of the '80s on a long adventure finding funding for his various projects (itself a lively tale of Denver oilmen and breakfasts in Vegas on the way to L.A.), but his day job was still teaching film at the University of Southern Colorado. He still conducts some online courses at the school, now CSU Pueblo, even though he's retired. His earlier movie-making career grew from his hobbies.

"When I was eleven, I took up photography. ... That started me down the road to ruin," he says dryly. "Because I started printing photographs and making little stop-motion films, and little by little the projects got bigger and bigger...and it just grew from there." His other big influence was the same thing that prevented him from taking his photography skills to the coasts: a love and fascination for the stories and people of Colorado and his hometown. As he puts it: "I'm quite a history buff. Matter of fact, I almost became a history major, but I loved art too much."

The practical reason that *Curse of the Blue Lights* was made is that Johnson's third (and most ambitious and expensive) historical effort kept falling through. Faced with the frustrating waiting game of having some money but not enough, he decided to come up with a script that would work with his current budget. He looked to the horror genre and frequent collaborator Sisson, who matched the director's enthusiasm for history with a love of the spooky stuff. "Little by little, I put in a number of these local history things," says Johnson, "and Bryan had so many references to classic horror films that he knew, and so between us...we came up with the *Blue Lights* script."



Blue Lights' zombies pose with Bryan Sisson and the effects crew.

John Henry Johnson

Sisson and his brother, Mark, were also responsible for the extensive makeup and special effects, crafting underground lairs full of rotting corpses, gummy-mouthed murderous scarecrows and dissolving bodies full of worms. Most impressive is a trio of villainous ghouls in full makeup, prosthetics, contacts and dentures, the primary antagonists for the film's hapless teenagers. And if that wasn't enough, there's a people-eating, Kaiju-esque "Muldoon Man" monster that lumbers into the film's climax – another historical reference, this one to a nineteenth-century hoax in which a supposedly prehistoric petrified man was unearthed in nearby Beulah.

It's a slice of lost nostalgia both eerie and goey, and a must-see for Coloradans who grew up loving the genre, Mercado attests: "There's not a ton of Colorado-made, feature-length horror films, and quite frankly, I can't think of any that came out of Pueblo. So that was really exciting to me, to discover that. But this is exactly the kind of movie that, if it would have been on the video store shelves when I was a kid, just based on that cover art alone, with the Muldoon Man, I would have absolutely rented this, and it would have been a favorite."

Today she **manages her own video store**, where Denverites can easily pick up a copy of *Blue Lights* (among many, many other gems) from the very people who restored it. The new release comes in a package that collectors will find tempting, along with a full-length documentary partially shot at the Archive with Johnson, Sisson and more cast and crew, as well as a vast gallery of period photography from the film's production. Even if you're a fan of physical media, Mercado emphasizes that coming to the theater on Saturday is the ideal way to experience it.



The cast and crew of *Curse of the Blue Lights*.

John Henry Johnson

"This is exactly the type of film that is meant for a group watch," she says. "It's going to be a totally different experience watching it with a packed house, because it's fun, it's cheesy, it's funny, it's low-budget. These films are meant to be watched with an audience of genre fans.

"This is a movie that nobody's heard of," she continues, "but with the director coming and the makeup effects guy coming, I really hope that people will take a chance on something that they haven't heard of, and come see this and show these old-school Colorado filmmakers some love – and that horror fans in Denver are into this deeper-cut stuff. This is such a cool film, and it's such a rare treat to show something made in the '80s from Pueblo. Come on, this is awesome!"

***Curse of the Blue Lights, 7 p.m., Saturday, September 30, Sie Film Center, 2510 East Colfax Avenue. Tickets are \$14 at [denverfilm.org](http://denverfilm.org).***

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