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Women in Horror Recognition Month Profile: Michelle Tomlinson



By [Angelo Bell](#), Yahoo! Contributor Network
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Mon Feb 14, 2011, 3:45 pm EST

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As a filmmaker, I first came across [Michelle Tomlinson](#) on [MySpace](#) in 2007. I immediately recognized that she was a Scream Queen, an actress known for her roles in horror films. As the years went by I watched Michelle as she completed more films, a web series, and many other performance endeavors. In 2009 Michelle sent me a copy of her film, "[The Cellar Door](#)," a tale about a young woman who awakes in the diabolical torture chamber of an obsessed serial killer, for whom she's become a new pet trapped in his basement. I watched that film and I gained enormous respect for Michelle. Not only did she prove to be a talented actress, she was also savvy and dedicated film marketer.

Every Christmas I receive a holiday postcard from Michelle. It was her most recent holiday card that stuck out in my mind when I went looking for a worthy subject to profile as a celebration of "Women in Horror Recognition Month."

How did you get started in the horror genre? Was it by accident or choice? If you had a chance to change things would you?

Everything for me started with "The Cellar Door." Christopher Nelson, whom I'd already known for a long time, phoned and said he'd written a script with me in mind for the main character. I fell in love with the project immediately. Several months before starting production on the film, I auditioned for Kevin Tenney's "[Brain Dead](#)." I booked a lead in that and wound up shooting [that film] about a month before "The Cellar Door." I think the real answer is both by accident and by choice. I fell into the world of horror and wouldn't change anything. I'm in love with the journey of life and being a part of the horror genre is simply a part of my journey.

You seem to wear many hats in horror films. What are those hats and what is your preferred role/responsibility on a film? How do you manage to juggle these diverse components and make them work for you?

First and foremost, I love acting. It feeds a part of my spirit in such a way that nothing else can compare. The other hats I've started wearing are producing, a tad bit of directing (web series "[Mis-Adventures of McT & A](#)") and discussing story concepts with writers that I work with. Let me state, for the record, I am absolutely NOT a writer! I'm the girl that says: "What would happen if the child had lived in that other scene?" Or: "Are you sure those two characters wouldn't start

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making out right there?" I've dipped my baby toes into directing with the web series mentioned above with my partner [Kimberly Amato](#). Since I'm also an acting coach, directing actors is a very natural progression.

Juggling the hats can be difficult. When Kimberly Amato and I shot the short film "Itch," I also wore the hat of the Line Producer while on set. I played a very dark character. I learned a valuable lesson: When playing a dark/heavy character, NEVER allow yourself wear multiple hats. My performance suffered and I made a lot of mistakes on the producing aspect. I'm glad I went through it, as I learned a tremendous amount. But I will not be repeating that one! With "Mis-Adventures of McT & A" the act of juggling is much simpler. [The series has] a lighter tone and air of silliness. Being a multi-hat girl with producing, directing, and acting is easier because I'm spoofing myself!

How do you balance the business aspects of making movies with the artistic passion needed to perform well in movies?

I was blessed with a balanced brain? Haha, I can hear my mom laughing through the ether at that answer. Honestly, I was raised by a Marine and an artist. My whole life, I was surrounded by a father who literally had a genius level IQ, had a Masters in Business, and was ballsy and tough. Add to that my mom, who has the most amazing inner strength and is a multi-faceted artist who creates sculptures from a block of wood or a block of clay, and paints gorgeous paintings from a blank canvas. In short, I firmly believe it's in my upbringing to be able to do both things. It's literally in my blood to be able to spin different plates.

Do-it-yourself (DIY) distribution is a hot topic among independent filmmakers. What are your ideas about this subject considering the state of Hollywood and the film industry?

It feels like Hollywood is terrified of taking leaps and chances. All the studios are publically owned companies. There are decision makers involved that only know business and don't know Hollywood. Films like [Ben Affleck's "The Town"](#) are considered Indie due to how it they are financed. But it was an incredible flick! Of course it did get distribution because, let's face it, [Ben Affleck](#) made it. But it was also fantastic.

In order to DIY, you need the capital to create the cover art, get the copies made, get your website built, etc. These costs go well beyond production and post-production. You can also use [YouTube](#) as your outlet and pray you get enough hits to generate interest for funding bigger projects you have down the pipeline.

I don't think there's a right way or wrong way to approach distribution. It's a crap shoot. You can pour your entire life savings into one project and it can die a silent death in the graveyard of "ungood" films. Or it can hit big, go huge, and be a magnificent success.

DIY might make your money back so you can move on to your next project. That possibility is there. You might get hosed by a dishonest distribution company when they leak your film onto the Internet. It's like suddenly you've lost a bundle in back-end points because your film is available everywhere as an illegal download before it's officially released.

The one thing I firmly believe is holding steadfast to your vision and never cry "uncle" because you feel desperate to get your film made. Staying the course and embracing perseverance is the way to go, regardless if you're in the DIY arena or closing deals with the big wigs.

Some folks say "horror" is on the decline. Some say the genre is going as strong as ever. What is your opinion and why?

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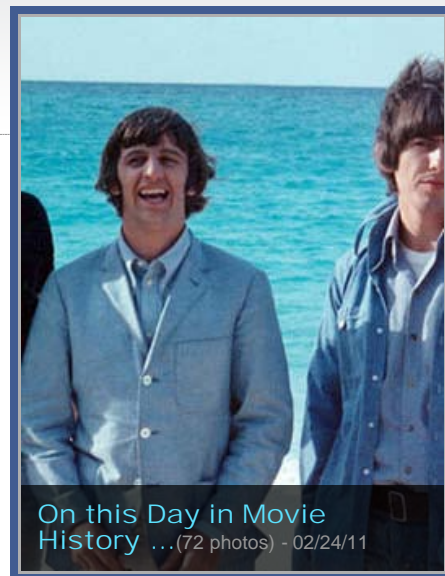
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Horror has been around for friggin' ever. It's not going anywhere. It's been perhaps a bit more popular the last several years, but I don't feel like it's on some kind of decline. If it was on a decline, how can we explain sold-out horror conventions? Also, at the [American Film Market](#), my L.A. business partner spoke with several distribution companies and asked what types of films are the hottest and getting picked up the fastest. The answer was horror and action. I'd have to surmise the genre is here to stay, for at least a long hot minute.

How do you stay in touch with horror fanboys and fangirls? How important is social media to you in connecting with your fans.

I get random emails from all over the world and a lot through [Facebook](#) and even Myspace. Social media rocks for making it easy to stay in touch with people. Through [Twitter](#), they can check in from a distance and see what kind of shenanigans I'm up to. I like being able to be personable.

Where do you find the inspiration for your story ideas and/or your performances?

As an actor, inspiration comes from story, circumstances, and imagination. I'm not big on using substitution, as that tends to "run out" when you rely on it too much. I like to live in the world of "what if" and "what would this feel like" and go from there.

What surprises you most about the changes in independent film since you first started out?

I believe low budget Indies were budgeted anywhere from \$10k to \$1 million. They still can be, of course, especially if you have friends who can help you with equipment, labor, actors who work for free, etc. But these days when you hear low budget, it usually starts with \$2 million and goes from there and has a name attached.

The technology has also changed to the point that anyone can go buy a killer video camera and just shoot something. This works really well for the indie filmmaker to keep costs low, but it also allows anyone to make a movie! So there's a lot of what I call "ungood" product out there. I read over 50 scripts in 2010. Some of these people would just dump their idea out in [Microsoft Word](#), call it a script, and call themselves a filmmaker.

In your opinion what are the pros and cons of choosing a horror film versus a drama or comedy?

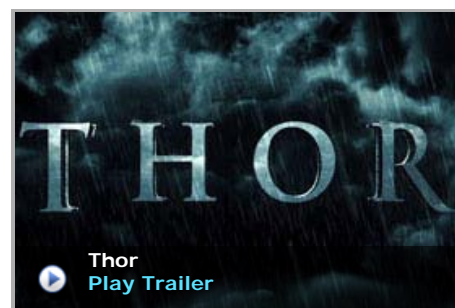
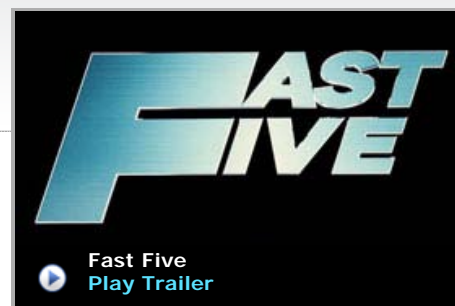
Pros? It might sound gross, but getting bloody can be a lot of fun. All of a sudden you're covered in red colored maple syrup and craving pancakes. I've always had a fascination with how practical effects are executed. While working on "Brain Dead" and "[George's Intervention](#)," I got front row seats to see how some things are done. It's very cool. Also, in creature-feature horror, you're going out of the realm of any kind of possible reality. You get to explore the way "out there" juice and have fun with it. In psychological thriller horror, it's a massive challenge to put yourself in the character's shoes of getting tortured and locked in a box like in "The Cellar Door." That's not a mental place any sane human would want to explore just for giggles. Horror kicks down the barriers of your mind and you're able to experience a lot of things you'd (hopefully) never experience in your normal life.

Cons? As much as I love horror, I also really love drama. I'm a lead in the feature film "[Indelible](#)." It's an awesome indie drama in which I play a tattoo artist. It's a gritty picture and it was an amazing experience because it did deal with things that can and do happen in real life all the time. I'm also in an extremely broad comedy "[The Pathetically Cheap Adventures of Xtra-Man](#)." It's really campy, over the top, and silly. I had a blast in the film playing a vapid ex-stripper. She was so dippy!

The reason I bring both of these films up is because it's much harder to get those noticed on my

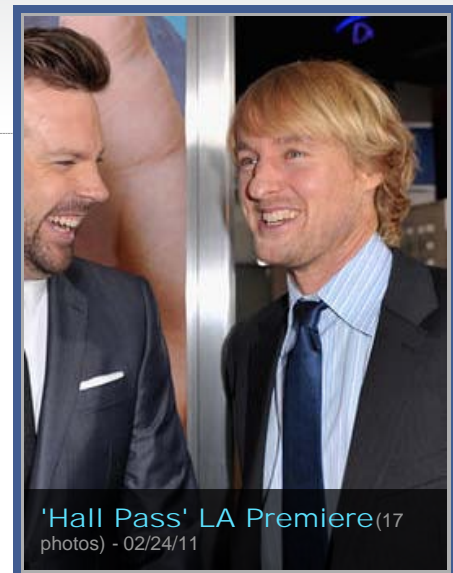
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end of the spectrum since most people only know me as being involved in horror. We can accidentally pigeon hole ourselves and just like A-List celebrities that we're used to seeing in certain roles, and that's how a lot of indie filmmakers see horror actors. Actors generally just want to work on anything that's a quality project with quality people and on characters we can sink or teeth into. Genre is not everything.

Aside from talent, what other qualities do you consider important in order to reach your potential as a horror film queen?

Be good to people! There are some amazing girls in horror today that I have the honor of knowing and being friends with. Kimberly Amato and Brooke Lewis are two of them. Both of those girls are incredibly talented and aren't afraid to work hard. We seem to have a few things in common: Strength to say "no" when a project doesn't speak to us to be involved, integrity in work ethic and communication, and we "bring it" on days of shooting. We also know how to have fun. There are a lot of divas in the world, and they're becoming a lot less popular because they are such a pain in the arse. Make sure you know how to act - take classes and hone your craft. Network. Get seen at events. Figure out who's who and work hard.

To sum up, I'll use a quote from Matt Zettel, the director of "The Cellar Door:" Matt says, "Michelle Tomlinson is everything that a director wants out of an actress. Smart, sexy and fearless! It was an absolute pleasure working with her on "The Cellar Door" and I can't wait to film the sequel with her!"

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VERY awesome article! I'm a bit surprised to learn that DIY in film isn't quite as looked down upon as it is in, say, the novel writing arena. DIY in film, though, does allow for filmmakers and wanna be filmmakers to go ahead and take a leap of faith and complete a project that mainstream Hollywood wouldn't touch, but as Michelle states, it can make for some bad films, too.

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