



FROM HOLLYWOOD TO THE EMBALMING ROOM

TALKING ABOUT
THE ART IN RESTORATIVE ARTS

BY LACY ROBINSON

Everyone in this business has their story, that moment when they became interested in funeral service and felt the motivation to pursue it professionally. Whether they are funeral directors or work for an association or vendor, there's a commitment to preserving the value of funeral service and honoring lives that connects funeral service professionals of all ages and experience levels.

For Emmy Award-winning Hollywood makeup artist Dean Jones, his desire to step out of his comfort zone to help embalmers and restorative artists developed following the deaths of two close family members in 2003. His passion to share new techniques and products for improving the overall appearance of the deceased has been both challenging and rewarding, just as his time in Hollywood has been.

In collaboration with Vernie Fountain, funeral director, embalmer and postmortem reconstructive surgery specialist, Jones launched Post Mortem Restorative Cosmetics (postmortemcosmetics.com) in 2014. I had an opportunity to

sit down with Jones recently to hear about his experience working with Hollywood's biggest stars and the potential he believes every embalmer/restorative artist has to transform the viewing experience for grieving families.

How did you first get into Hollywood makeup design?

Fortunately, I had parents who saw an influential opportunity when a Hollywood film crew came to a small town in Ramseur, North Carolina, when I was 7 years old. The movie was produced and directed by Dick Clark, producer and host of *American Band Stand*. My younger brother and I were exposed to an experience I would never forget. The day's filming activities consisted of an old-fashioned, 1940s-style gangster shootout. There was automatic gunfire, breakaway glass and bloody bullet wounds produced by a professional Hollywood makeup artist.

I went home and made several attempts to recreate the bullet wounds with mortician's wax and a Karo corn syrup

blood formula. From that day forward, Halloween was a special event at our house. We eventually perfected those same bloody bullet wounds at home and made crude attempts at recreating Universal Studios monsters such as Frankenstein, Dracula, Werewolf and The Mummy.

What an unforgettable experience, especially for a 7-year old!

At that time, there was virtually no opportunity for anyone aspiring to be a filmmaker in North Carolina. To further my experience and knowledge of makeup effects, my only avenue was through my involvement in live theater. After graduating from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro with a bachelor's of fine arts in drama, I spent the summer as a stunt man in a Wild West stunt show. Later, I entered the UNCG master's program for acting/directing. My plan was to earn an MFA and then somehow make my way to Hollywood to start an acting career. A short time after starting the MFA program, a local independent film production company held auditions, and luckily, I was hired for one of the supporting roles. As indie filmmaking goes, I was asked to wear additional hats. Willingly and enthusiastically, I always said yes because in the movie business, "no" is an unacceptable answer.

What was your first big break?

Over the span of my career, there were a number of small breaks that led to an opportunity, opened a new door or became the next step on the ladder.

My first big break occurred during an interview with legendary Hollywood Oscar- and Emmy Award-winning makeup artist Michael Westmore. As department head for the *Star Trek: The Next Generation* series, he had been gearing up for the new *Star Trek* franchise titled *Deep Space Nine*.

This interview would forever change my life. Michael gave me the greatest opportunity of all when he asked me to join the makeup staff for the new *Star Trek* series. I had the privilege of learning not only the techniques and skills passed down by three generations of makeup artists, but most importantly, he extended his friendship, fatherly support and encouragement, which inspired me on a personal level. I gained a wealth of knowledge through Michael's influence. The importance of sharing that knowledge, coupled with his saint-like patience, was the most valuable lesson I learned as an artist and one I still practice to this day.

Looking back on the films you've been a part of, which is your favorite?

Who wouldn't want to be a part of a pirate movie? Of all the movies I've been fortunate enough to work on, my favorite would be *Pirates of the Caribbean*, parts 2, 3 and 4. There are many reasons why.

Being out on the Caribbean aboard the iconic *Black Pearl* pirate ship for months at a time with the legendary Jack Sparrow (Johnny Depp) and Geoffrey Rush and witnessing an all-out sword battle, complete with exploding cannons and flying debris, was breathtaking and astounding.

To watch producer Jerry Bruckheimer, director Gore Verbinski and cinematographer Dariusz Wolski do their magic was certainly an educational and inspirational experience.

I also had the pleasure of working alongside the very best and most talented makeup artists, technicians and filmmakers in the business. Waking up on an island resort in the Bahamas is not a bad way to begin your work day either, especially when my days off were spent scuba diving with my colleagues. It was simply a dream come true.



Above, left-right: Glyn Tallon, embalmer and postmortem reconstructive specialist; Dean and Starr Jones, Hollywood makeup/special effects artists; and Vernie Fountain, embalmer, postmortem reconstructive specialist and owner, Fountain National Academy.

What personal experience prompted you to lend your talents to caring for the deceased?

In early 2003, we had two relatives who were tragically killed in automobile accidents within a few months of each other. The trauma was significant, and to most embalmers, their appearance would have been considered non-viewable. For the family, this horrific last image would be forever burned in our memory.

Under the circumstances, the funeral home did the very best it could with the knowledge and materials it had to work with. I thought to myself, 'How can this be considered acceptable?' But I wondered why they were still using wax, plaster and store-bought cosmetics for facial restoration. After some research, I discovered that the funeral home was using 100-year-old techniques and substandard cosmetics not suitable for cadaver skin.

Did you speak with the funeral director?

Yes, I spoke to the funeral director in regard to their appearance and he showed me a few of the materials he had been working with. I expressed my interest in improving the current restoration process and offered an alternative solution. My materials would cover the bruising and replace the wax products so effectively that any surface trauma would be absolutely undetectable. I offered to provide my materials for future use should he have similar cases.

Did you ever hear from that funeral director again?

Within a few short months, a phone call came from the same funeral director. He invited me over to discuss a particular case. I thought this scenario was going to be a consultation; nothing could have prepared me for what lie ahead. My brother, who is also a professional makeup artist, went along for the ride. This was an unusual experience for us. Upon arrival, we were led past the embalming room and into a tiny prep room. There on a stark metal table lay what looked like a cowboy dressed for a rodeo, complete with his favorite boots, jeans and decorative cowboy shirt.

Being uncomfortable to begin with and not wanting to blatantly stare at the decedent's face first, my eyes chose to 'break in' the scenery. I checked out his cool boots first before migrating into the graphic and gruesome territories. You would think, after 30 years of creating on-screen mayhem, I would be immune from my own graphic creations. This was different. This was reality. There were multiple lacerations about the face and head, massive trauma to the eye socket with surrounding tissue damage and severe skin slip on the face, neck and hands.

That must have been quite a shock!

After getting over the initial shock of this graphic view, I proceeded to explain to the funeral director that restoration could be achieved despite the complexities of the case. I gave insight on what could be achieved in terms of the restoration process. The funeral director nodded his head occasionally as if he understood and perhaps was putting thought behind how he was going to achieve this on his own. The situation played out like scene from a movie. After a brief moment of silence, he looked at us and said, 'Do you think you boys can have this done by tonight?' I felt a chill across my neck. I looked at my brother as if we had just been asked to perform heart surgery. I didn't know what to say.

He then reached into his pocket and handed me a set of keys. 'I will leave you boys the keys; you can lock up when you're done.' Struggling for words to wriggle my way out, I came up with the only response I could: 'Sir, I don't have a license to do this kind of work.' He promptly replied, 'Son, you don't need a license; it's cosmetics and you're a professional makeup artist.' There was no rebuttal. He had me there. His last comment: 'I know you boys will do a great job, just lock up when you're done, and the viewing is at 10 a.m.'

We thanked him for his confidence, returned to our office, collected our makeup supplies and scooted back to the mortuary. It was the most surreal experience of my life.

We searched the cabinets for surgical garb and covered ourselves from head to toe with booties, gowns, masks, hoodies and whatever else we could find. We covered every inch of our exposed skin and clothes. We looked like we were about to perform open-heart surgery. We dressed the part only because we had seen it in the movies.

How long did the restoration process take?

We worked nonstop for seven hours. We made a life cast, resculpted the right side of his face and produced a latex replace-

ment prosthetic. I produced a product that inhibited the skin slip and another product that filled in the lacerations, which hardened to the consistency of real skin. We never used wax or any other products found in an embalming room. The next morning, we returned to find that the makeup was completely stable and had not rubbed off. We were relieved, as there was only 20 minutes to the viewing.

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We were told the family was extremely pleased to see him as they remembered him and not what they saw after the tragic accident. Although it was a challenge and a liability, we had no regrets in taking on the responsibility to recreate his natural appearance. Families that lose loved ones deserve only the best – to view a comforting and peaceful image rather than a haunting image that would forever burn in their memory. In such time of sorrow and in a time of need, 'deathcare' truly becomes 'healthcare' for everyone involved.

Through a series of questions to other funeral directors, I discovered that embalming students were being taught methods dating back more than a century. The current textbook was based on old theatrical makeup techniques dating to the 1940s. After spending time with Vernie Fountain and discussing the mission and responsibility of those who care for the deceased, we decided to offer and provide better education, better tools and better cosmetics to the funeral profession because we now have the ability and skills in restorative art to achieve what was once thought impossible.

It's been three years since you launched your collaborative line of restorative cosmetics with Vernie Fountain. What are the similarities between your postmortem reconstructive cosmetic products and Hollywood special effects cosmetics?

The fabrication techniques are somewhat similar but have been adapted for embalmers. We have very specifically engineered proprietary tools and cosmetic products formulated for mortuary use only.

Being an outsider to the funeral business and now being on the inside, what do you believe is the biggest challenge embalmers/restorative artists face when caring for the deceased?

It was simply explained to me by funeral directors and em-

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balmers that 'there are those who work in the back' and 'those who work in the front.' Everyone's perspective on what is cosmetically acceptable is vastly different. The challenge is for those 'in the front' to realize that those 'in the back' are hungry for change and anxious for knowledge but unfortunately deficient in the proper materials and tools to treat, care for and provide the very best cosmetics appropriate for the deceased.

As a Hollywood makeup artist would care for a movie star, in the same manner should we also care for the deceased. In the film business, we call this 'last looks.' It's the phrase for the 'final check' of the actor before the camera rolls.

We – all those who care, all embalmers and all funeral directors – must be forward-thinking. Please consider the final appearance of the deceased and the value of open-casket viewing. Reconsider open-casket viewing when your past experience tells you otherwise. As Vernie and I always say, 'There is a better way.' Let us provide you, and share with one another, the knowledge, experience and skill we have spent decades perfecting. It will truly make a difference in our profession and in the lives of the families that need us.

Thinking back on your time with funeral directors and embalmers early on, have you had any ah-ha moments?

I truly value the time spent with funeral directors and embalmers. They are unique in their own right, and it takes a special person to take care of the needs of the deceased and families. I consider the funeral business comparable to show business. There is a comparison.

I do have those ah-ha moments occasionally, but most of the time, those words are spoken by embalmers when

they've suddenly learned a new technique or about a product we've developed that made their job easier. We would like to feel that we are elevating the profession by improving the overall appearance of the deceased. Vernie Fountain coined the phrase, 'There is a better way,' and we feel that better way exists utilizing the PMRC techniques and products. I place the funeral profession right alongside the medical profession, as it's been a great experience to share our knowledge and experience with a profession we so highly regard.

What's one (or two) Hollywood makeup tip that would be beneficial to embalmers/restorative artists?

Consider further improving one's skills as a restorative artist and consider the final appearance of the deceased. Retire that can of wax. We maintain a 'tips and tricks' section on the PMRC website (postmortemcosmetics.com), with instructions on the proper use of our products. We'd also like those who may have their own tips or suggestions to submit those to our website. We must all share our knowledge. We have certification in several states to provide continuing education classes. For 2017-18, we will be providing seminars on the innovative restorative and cosmetics techniques we have developed. We invite embalmers and funeral directors everywhere to embrace the change and join us. ☰

Lacy Robinson is NFDA director of member development.

For those funeral service professionals who live for Halloween, can you share your other passion outside PMRC and movies?

My brother, Starr Jones, and I own and operate a haunted house attraction. It's open during most of the month of October and during the Halloween season. It's titled 'The Original Hollywood Horror Show' and is located in Snow Camp, North Carolina. It is the scariest haunted attraction, complete with an indoor and outdoor walk-through path of terror. We have dozens of live actors, there's crazy special-effects makeup used and there's a realistic Hollywood set with props. This is our 28th season. Check us out at hollywoodhorrorshow.com.

For funeral directors or embalmers interested in attending next year, email me at jonesmovie@aol.com. We will provide one free pass to see our show if you're ever in our neck of the woods. Please provide some proof of ID as a funeral director or embalmer at the box office for verification.

