

I Get Paid to Scream

Inside a karaoke room at Fantastic Fest, Josie Juliette Wert, Ava Mae Seidensticker, Luke Speakman, Kimberly Epstein, Tess Williams, and Gregg Bishop talk apple boxes, midnight witches, and the Halloween night Bishop shot five minutes from the house he grew up in.

Interview by Paul Salfen · AMFM Magazine

Fantastic Fest has a way of stuffing a whole festival into a room that used to be built for singalongs. In one of the karaoke dens at the Alamo Drafthouse South Lamar, Paul Salfen sat down with the traveling circus behind *The Heretiks* — director Gregg Bishop, writers Luke Piotrowski and Ben Collins, and the actors who spent Halloween night locked in a house with a coven that wanted the world ended by sunrise.

The picture, which world-premiered at the 2026 festival before heading to Sitges, is a gateway horror with real teeth: Ada (Josie Juliette Wert) protecting her little sister Mabel (Ava Mae Seidensticker) when witches mark the younger girl as a sacrifice. Luke Speakman is in the young company. Kimberly Epstein's Cai has broken ranks with the coven. Tess Williams leads the fanatics. Bishop, who made *Dance of the Dead*, keeps the thing moving like a campfire story that does not blink.

What the karaoke-room tape does not do is label every voice. Salfen's questions are clear. The answers come in a pile — young actors talking over each other, Bishop steering, someone thanking the writers at four in the morning in the woods. AMFM is printing the conversation as it lived: a group memory of a movie that was, by their account, actually fun to make.

HALLOWEEN, WITCHCRAFT, WHAT COULD GO WRONG

Salfen opened on the red carpet they had walked the night before and on the obvious joke. Halloween. Witchcraft. What could go wrong.

"What doesn't love it doesn't go wrong," somebody shot back, and the table laughed the way people laugh when they have already survived the thing.

Salfen pushed on the gap between the fantasy of being on a set and the reality. One of the actors — the voice that later admitted to loving a good scream — said the usual rule did not apply here. "We grow up thinking, oh, wouldn't it be cool to be in a movie or be on a TV set. And then you get there and you go, it's not that fun. This looked like it was fun."

It was. That was the consensus before anyone named a favorite day.

THE SKINLESS MONSTER AND THE ACCIDENTAL DUET

Asked for the scene that made them look around and think I get paid to do this, Ava Mae Seidensticker — Mabel on the picture — did not hesitate long.

“The day that we filmed with the skinless monster.” A pause, a filtered mouth, then the story. There is a beat where she and Luke Speakman have to scream at the same time, “this big bloody murder scream.” Seidensticker had been waiting for it. “That’s the part that I look for in every” picture, she said, then described letting out “the craziest scream ever.” Speakman was not ready. The first scream pulled a louder one out of him. High five from her side of the frame. A look from his.

“I was like, I get paid to scream.”

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— Ava Mae Seidensticker

SIX INCHES OF APPLE BOX

Another favorite was less gore than geometry. Luke Speakman is, in his own words, “very short for my age.” There is a character who can teleport, more or less, and a shot that has to travel a line of faces: Ada, Cai, Mabel, forehead to forehead, shoulder to shoulder, camera coming around.

“Full for half apple box. I don’t know, but I had to stand on it and I was still short. Dip the camera down again. So for that one scene I grew like six something inches just for that one. And then I got cut right back.”

Gateway horror still has to hit marks. The marks, on that day, were measured in plywood.

TRICK-OR-TREATING AS AN ADULT

Bishop — the voice that talks like a director who got to shoot in sequence, which almost nobody does — put the tone of the movie on the opening. “We open our movie with a fun trick-or-treating scene, which is just an homage to the Halloweens of my childhood. I think the Halloweens of the 90s and early 2000. And it is so nostalgic, and it really, I think, sets the innocence of the movie because this is a gateway horror movie. Something that I think teens and adults will enjoy.”

They shot it, he said, like five minutes from the house he grew up in. “Everywhere, all the trick-or-treat scenes where I trick-or-treated as a kid.” He got to go trick-or-treating as an adult. “Candy is great.”

Anytime they nailed a practical or a performance, he said, it was “pure joy and magic. I love it, and it’s just the best cast and crew I’ve ever worked with before. It was pure joy.”

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— Gregg Bishop

THROUGH THE DOOR

Kimberly Epstein — Cai, the witch who has broken ranks with the coven — reached for a quieter favorite: a connection scene shot through a door that the DP, Jordan, made gorgeous. “We have a really wild dynamic between the two of us and our relationship.” They did a few takes. Then Bishop walked over and whispered something in the other actor’s ear.

“I have no idea what he said. And he goes, all right, from the top. And so we do it one more time. And she added a line that he asked her to say, and it just emotionally wrecked me.”

Bishop told them afterward that the line had gone to the cutting-room floor. It had not. “I tell you all kinds of tricks and treats.”

FIVE A.M. AND THE TEXT AFTER WRAP

Favorite days kept stacking. Someone mentioned Bishop texting after they wrapped — a small, specific kindness. Tess Williams — Neve, the fanatic at the head of the coven — working mostly at the end of overnight days with kids on the clock, had a big emotional scene pushed three days in a row.

“When you’re filming with kids, the schedules. And it was all overnights as well. So a lot of my scenes, we’re at the end of the very night, at the end of the night at 5 a.m.” When they finally got it, “I just felt all of the weight like off of me.” Williams asked Bishop if he had been messing with her on purpose, using the delay as fuel. Bishop’s answer, as recalled: scheduling problems. Then, with a grin the tape still holds, something like genius.

“That’s why we do this. We can get something great.”

Josie Juliette Wert — Ada, the older sister holding the night together — named the witches around the fire. Campy, spooky, and there were not enough of those days. One set-piece they prepped until everybody was safe and blocked, then got in a single take. “I was like, dang, I was ready to keep going. And I was like, okay, that’s it, move on.”

WHEN THE SUN GOES DOWN AND THE KIDS GO HOME

Salfen asked Bishop what he keeps in mind when it is go time — when the light is dying or a minor’s hours are about to snap shut.

“You’re kind of prioritizing because you want as many shots as possible, as many options as possible. So it is like you’re always going, well, I’m not going to get to that. What really tells the story here. When the sun’s going down or the kid’s about to go away because there are times out, you go, okay, what’s important to the story. At the end of day, you’re just telling the story. Am I getting the human connection between the people? Because at the end of the day, that’s all that really matters.”

The actors answered the same question from the other side of the camera. Speakman’s version was blunt. “I just do it.” Another needed more runway. “What helps me the most is imagining myself in the environment. What would your character be thinking right now, and have you ever felt that way before? If so, what happened prior to that?” The stakes helped. “You don’t get this

opportunity a lot. You're filming a movie right now. It takes so many auditions. It's just such a special moment."

Bishop jumped in on the kids. They were twelve when they shot. High-pressure, not a lot of time. "We'd be like, all right, we have five minutes." Small adjustments. Then they would nail it. "Pros. Both of these."

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— Gregg Bishop

LIKE-MINDED PEOPLE AT 4 A.M.

Advice for a hard business, Salfen asked, given how light the set sounded.

Bishop pointed at the beginning, not the middle. "It was really just in the casting and then crewing up. Surrounding yourself with like-minded people. People who wanted to be there and wanted to make the movie. I sought out people that really, genuinely really love the material and love the characters. And same with the crew. Just the people who were better than me at everything so they could enhance the ideas. Surrounding yourself with people better than you."

An actor cut in with the writers. "Shout out to Luke and Ben. It's such an amazing story that when you're out there in the woods in the middle of the night at 4 a.m., everybody is so motivated to tell such an amazing story. We're there to make something amazing."

They did, Salfen said. And they had.

SHAKE SHACK, TWO-STEPPING, NOT 21

Fantastic Fest is barbecue, scary movies, and parties that start after the credits. Salfen asked what they had actually gotten to do in Austin.

The whole table talked over the after-party. Not 21 plus yet. A made-up word for their version of a night out. An In-N-Out run after a screening, then Shake Shack down the street. Two-stepping. "There's also so many brilliant filmmakers here," the way people talk when the festival is still happening around them.

Salfen thanked them for the movie and for the hour. The tape ends the way festival tapes end: stay tuned, more Fantastic Fest, a woo from the back of a karaoke room that, for twelve minutes, belonged to a coven, two sisters, and a director who still lives close enough to his childhood sidewalks to steal them for an opening scene.

THE PICTURE

The Heretiks is Gregg Bishop's latest after *Dance of the Dead* and a run of lean genre features. Luke Piotrowski and Ben Collins, who have *Hellraiser* among their credits, wrote the script. Josie Juliette Wert plays Ada; Ava Mae Seidensticker plays Mabel; Luke Speakman is in the young

company; Kimberly Epstein is Cai; Tess Williams is Neve. Jordan is the DP the cast thanked by name for the shot through the door.

It is a Halloween home-invasion witch picture that wants to be the movie you put on for teenagers without lying to them about blood. On the evidence of the karaoke room, the people who made it still like each other. That is not nothing. In this business it is almost the whole trick.

FIND THE HERETIKS

World premiere: Fantastic Fest 2026, Alamo Drafthouse South Lamar, Austin. European premiere: Sitges Film Festival. Directed by Gregg Bishop. Written by Luke Piotrowski and Ben Collins. Starring Josie Juliette Wert, Ava Mae Seidensticker, Luke Speakman, Kimberly Epstein, Tess Williams, and company.

Watch for distribution announcements after the festival run. Follow Fantastic Fest and the filmmakers for screening updates.

Interview conducted by Paul Salfen for AMFM Magazine, September 2026.

Paul Salfen is Managing Editor of AMFM Magazine and a veteran interviewer of film, television, music, and sports figures. He is the author of Going For It!, a collection of Hail Mary moments from the artists and athletes he has spent two decades putting on the record.