

The Creature Effects of The Keep

Nick Maley on the makeup effects seen in Michael Mann's thriller

By David Everitt



Above: A member of Nick Maley's makeup effects crew attends to a mechanized version of Molasar, the immortal denizen of the Keep. Opposite Page: Molasar in one of his later stages.

Makeup man Nick Maley considers *The Keep* to be one of his most unique assignments, a film that doesn't have "any immediate parallels." The film's setting of Nazi-occupied Rumania during World War II is an offbeat springboard for a gothic horror tale in which the 20th-century evil of Hitler's SS is confronted with an ancient, far more powerful evil. Director Michael Mann has described *The Keep's* historical setting of 1941 Europe as a time "when the unconscious of people is externalized;" accordingly, he has envisioned the film as a dream-like, expressionistic fairy tale for adults. Obviously, this is not just another horror movie. To create the most

overtly bizarre aspects of *The Keep*, the special effects, a special brand of inventiveness was required.

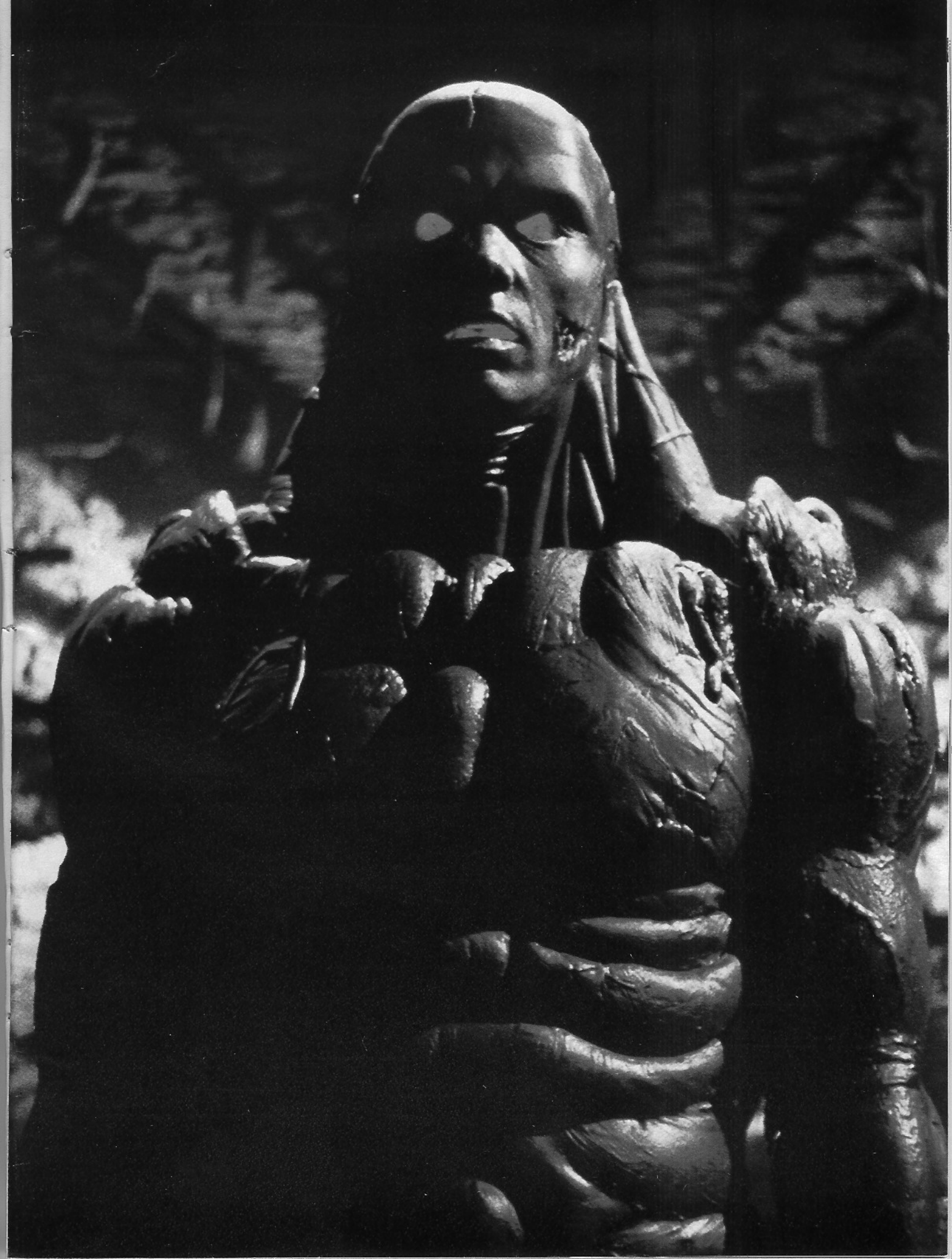
Maley (whose work has been seen in such pictures as *Horror Planet*, television's *Hunchback of Notre Dame* and the fantasy *Krull*—see FANGORIA #29) had to deal not only with unusual concepts in *The Keep* but a great quantity of work as well. In addition to the creature that is the embodiment of evil in *The Keep*, Maley had to develop old-age makeup for actor Ian McKellen who plays the Jewish historian Cuza, a crippled man who exchanges his soul for youth and health; and Maley had to supervise the construction of a veritable army of dummies to stand in for Ger-

man soldiers ravaged by Molasar, *The Keep's* ancient evil being. In one scene in particular, Maley and his crew had to create 50 "Mola-sized" dummies as well as make up 20 extras to look like the victim-dummies. For scenes showing the Germans at the mercy of the awesome power of Molasar, Maley worked very closely with master mechanical-effects artist Nick Allder, known for his work in films like *Alien* and *Empire Strikes Back*. Allder worked with Maley in staging the scenes of Molasar drawing the energy, the life-source, out of the Germans and leaving them as disintegrating husks. A variety of mechanical effects were used to destroy Maley's dummies, including smoke, explosions and crumbling effects. For his part, Maley coordinated his makeup efforts by using either wax, urethane or acrylic dummies as needed for the desired effect.

In addition to these many tasks, Maley also had to create a series of makeup creations to portray the uncanny evolution of Molasar. These creature effects involved a great deal of imagination as well as trial-and-error, and ultimately turned out to be the makeup centerpiece of the picture.

In F. Paul Wilson's novel *The Keep*, the mysterious resident of the title fortress is first perceived by the occupying German troops as a menace befitting the keep's Transylvanian locale—none other than the dreaded vampire. Molasar seems pleased with this theory and is ready to reinforce it. When he makes his first appearance in the quarters of Cuza, the man enlisted by the Nazis to unravel the mystery of the keep, Molasar is a black-clad aristocratic-type—tall, lean, commanding, with piercing eyes; in other words, a Christopher Lee stand-in. Only in the final chapters is Molasar revealed to be something far more insidious and destructive than your garden-variety vampire could ever hope to be. While a deceptively typical vampire might work in a novel, a movie version would need a more vividly visual representation of Molasar's distinctively evil character.

Director Mann wanted a very unusual creature-design, which placed a special kind of problem in the hands of Maley. "There was nothing in the project," says Maley, "that leads you in any one direction, which in one way is great but in other ways is a little difficult, especially when you don't have a lot of time to make up your mind exactly what it should be."





A Molasar costume subdivided into separate muscles and bones for realistic movement.

At first, Molasar was supposed to have no particular tangible form and then it was to gradually take on a shape that was to be influenced by the time in which it forms. The realization of this sort of concept, Maley points out, "requires a lot of discretion. It's a fairly hard thing to just pluck out of the air. It's not something that you would find in a standard monster movie; you can't just pull out a Creature from the Black Lagoon or an It monster, because they don't relate in any way to this project. And at the same time you have to do something that's fairly fantastic for the creature to be believable as an immortal which has been caged within this fortress for 400 years."

The process of designing the look of the evolving Molasar involved on-going discussions with Mann who maintained a firm con-

trol over the development of makeup effects, as he did with all aspects of *The Keep*. "Mike Mann is a very demanding director," says Maley. "He likes to have everything tested, he likes to know exactly what he's going to get. He's not one of those directors who will settle easily. He has an image in his mind of what he wants and that's basically what you're going to give him, which means you can go through tests and various stages before he gets exactly what he wants."

The vision conceived by Mann that was realized by Maley began with Molasar as a ball of energy which slowly materializes into a humanoid form. At first there is a nervous system, then a muscular and skeletal form, and eventually a recognizable humanoid incarnation. The idea of a shape-changing creature is not in itself new, but Mann wanted an

approach that was different from *American Werewolf in London* and *The Thing*. There are no on-screen transformations in *The Keep* because, as Maley explains, "the story is about people and the way that people are influenced by one another; at least that's a major part of the story, as I see it. Although Molasar is affecting everything and forcing situations, he isn't overexposed. You don't see him running around tearing people to bits, even though that is happening. He is changing all the time and, as there are gaps of several days between scenes showing Molasar, each time we see him he has already changed into something else."

Even though Maley didn't have to create on-screen transformations, the task of showing Molasar in progressive, sometimes radically different stages involved problems of its own. Maley explains: "To have a character which appears throughout the picture and never looks the same and yet you have to be able to recognize him as being the same character—that's not too easy. There were certain things we had to establish early on which had to be carried through from one form to another. Mainly, we locked down on his eyes, since the eyes are such a strong feature of any character. In Molasar's case, his eyes form very early on and this is something that we can recognize throughout the movie. Also, his body-lines had to develop in such a way that we start to recognize the body-line as being similar from one stage to the next, even though it has changed in form."

One of the "Molasized" SS troopers who transgresses an evil domain.





The evolving creature of *The Keep*.

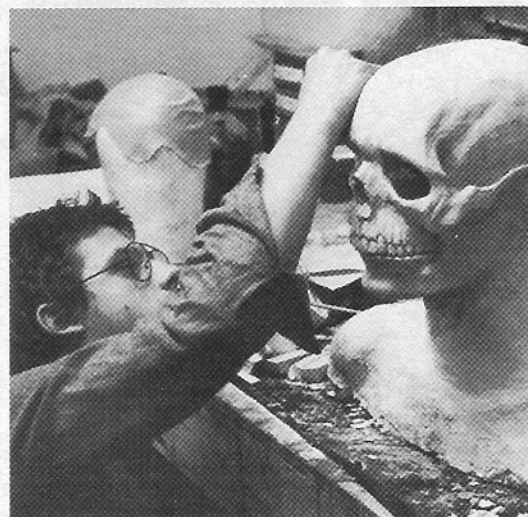
Another decision to be made involved the use of mechanical figures for Molasar. "We originally intended to make mechanical figures," says Maley, "and we actually built one for the second Molasar. It was going to be almost totally mechanical. But it becomes very difficult when you're dealing with a seven-foot tall figure as opposed to a two-foot tall creature. The scene in which it appears was conceived in a way that you perhaps saw only the head and shoulders of the creature. As we got closer to shooting the scene, Michael had decided that he really wanted to see a lot more of Molasar and therefore it really made it impractical to produce a totally mobile seven-foot mechanical creature. We instead went to a man in a suit."

The monster-suit created by Maley and his crew was fashioned in a way to give it a more realistic look than many creature-costumes have exhibited in the past. "Though there aren't any mechanical parts except for the use of lasers for the eyes and the movement in the jaw, it was still a quite sophisticated suit. Because the figure was in a skeletal and muscular form, it gave us the opportunity to be able to make separate body parts, like a giant jigsaw puzzle. We modeled it and then broke it down into separate bones and muscles, and then put the whole thing back together again. This gave us the advantage of muscles moving independently of each other and, in fact, of moving in relationship with each other.

"The muscles in the suit were literally

generated by the actor's muscle movement underneath. The undershape of the suit muscles had to fit particular muscles in the actor's body, and as those muscles moved, they generated movement in the suit. We would marry bicep in the suit, for example, to bicep movement in the performer. So the actor didn't have to think, 'Now I'll pull this lever,' or 'I'll squeeze that and this is going to make something move.' He could perform as he felt was right for the part and, as he performed and as he moved his own muscles, he would start the movement in the individual muscles above."

Within the exacting groundrules laid down by director Mann, Maley and his assistants have worked hard to produce a menace that will stand out amongst the host of other creatures seen in horror pictures. Like Maley's creature costume, the entire film *The Keep* uses familiar themes as a starting point and attempts to apply novel variations to make the picture unique within its genre. ☠



One of the creature heads being sculpted.



The face of immortal evil found by Germans in *The Keep*.