

## Keith Thomas

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[00:00:16] **Bryan Smith:** Brian Smith here and welcome to the Dream Path podcast, where I try to get inside the heads of talented creatives from all over the world.

[00:00:24] My goal is to demystify and humanize the creative process and make it accessible to everyone. Now let's jump in. Keith. Thomas is on the show. Keith is a screenwriter and director whose first feature "The Vigil" was released today on video, on demand. If you're looking for a highly original, disturbing and freaky horror film, check it out this weekend.

[00:00:47] "The Vigil" is about a man providing overnight watch to a deceased member of his former Orthodox Jewish community who encounters a malevolent entity. To be more specific the man watching the body is a Shomer under Jewish religious law. A Shomer is a legal guardian and trusted with the custody and care of another subject.

[00:01:06] In this case, a recently deceased body waiting to be taken to the morgue. The next morning, we talk about this in the interview, but one of the many impressive things about "The Vigil" is how much edge of your seat, tension and suspense Keith created with just a few characters and locations. I call this minimalist filmmaking, but the result when done well is anything but minimalist and is actually a full, robust and terrifying narrative.

[00:01:31] I don't know about you, but over the last year, one of the things my kids and I have found solace in while quarantine during the pandemic is horror movies. And after seeing quite a few of them recently, I feel qualified to tell you that "The Vigil" is well worth the price of admission, but don't take my word for it.

[00:01:48] Take Stephen King's word. Steven saw "The Vigil" before it was released, and he liked it so much. He approved Keith to direct a remake of Steven's 1984 film, "Firestarter" starring a young Drew Barrymore, which of course was based on Stephen King's novel of the same name. In this interview. Keith talks about what inspired him to write the screenplay for "The Vigil", how his career as a medical researcher in nursing homes informed his narratives in both his short film "Arkane" and "The Vigil".

[00:02:17] How a very specific world or community with a defined set of rules, like the Hasidic Jewish community in Brooklyn, where this movie is set, can make for a compelling setting in a horror movie, why he rejected an offer to buy this screenplay and instead chose to direct it on his own. Why he cast Dave Davis as the lead, how making his short film "Arkane", which is still available on YouTube, by the way, open the door to making "The Vigil" and how aspiring filmmakers can make short films to open similar opportunities.

[00:02:47] So without further ado, let's jump into my chat with Keith Thomas, Keith Thomas, welcome to Dream Path podcast.

[00:02:55] **Keith Thomas:** Thanks for having me.

[00:02:56] **Bryan Smith:** Yeah, I've been really looking forward to this because I watched the film, "The Vigil" and thank you for the screener, by the way your people sent me the screener. And I really appreciated the minimalism of the movie.

[00:03:09] I think that really added to. How freaky it got as things progressed. And ironically for me, the fewer locations and the fewer actual plot points that are happening, you know, actions, the more you're focused on the internal part of what's happening and the more you get to see the protagonists face and the closeups, and really focus in on just the freakiness of what is going down in this movie.

[00:03:40] So I wanted to comment right out of the gate about the minimalism of the movie and ask you if that was intentional on your part due to budget, intentional, due to just wanting to create a film that has those elements, those psychological elements without the focus, the extraneous focus of extra characters and sets and that type of thing.

[00:04:05] **Keith Thomas:** You know what, it's kind of a combination of all of the above in that for budgetary reasons. I knew. So, I guess to back it up, I would say it was going to be my first feature. And that was kind of what I always intended. And so, I knew I was not going to get that much money in terms of budget. So, I knew I had to make it very contained and kind of, you know, bring it down. At the same time, you know, when I had written the script, uh, my manager kind of sent it out and there were a few people interested in buying it, but not letting me direct and actually upping the budget. Hmm. And I thought that was silly. It didn't make any sense. Why would you throw a bunch of money at this and why would you expand it?

[00:04:49] I thought streamlining, it made a lot of sense. For me as a first-time filmmaker, in terms of the, this being the first feature and B the story, he didn't need it. I liked it being very minimal. It literally is, you know, a dark night of the soul for one person, and there are some characters that move in and out of that orbit.

[00:05:06] But we didn't need to be anywhere, but in front of that body for most of it. So, there was kind of a simplicity to that and as the script kind of morphed and did its thing, sure, there were other additional scenes that I cut in the scripting phase that I pay for budget or just because it just didn't seem necessary.

[00:05:25] For example, there was a scene that I had written there. There's a part of our main characters backstory is a traumatic event and associated with that traumatic event was a scene that I'd written that involved, an ambulance that involved, you know, ambulance, traveling to a hospital and a scene in the back of that ambulance.

[00:05:40] And that was one of those things. Whereas the, you know, Yeah, it could have added a little, but we just did it. Didn't need it. The film didn't need it and we didn't need it for the budget. So, it was all of those things kind of combined. It just made sense for it to be streamlined and minimalistic in terms of the story we were telling.

[00:05:56] **Bryan Smith:** So, let's go back to the moment where you have an offer to buy your screenplay. As someone who is just coming up in the film world and you have a short under your belt, which was fantastic by the way, I saw it on YouTube. Oh, thanks. So you

have this short under your belt, but you are pretty much brand new to the feature film world and you're offered money on this screenplay, was that a crossroads for you or was it an easy decision to just say "Nope. We're going to make this the way I envisioned".

[00:06:29] **Keith Thomas:** You know, for, for a hot second. It was, there was some thought I, you know, there was, I had a meeting, so there was some interest in it. And I actually had a meeting with a production company about it.

[00:06:41] And it was pretty obvious that I wasn't going to be allowed to direct, which it depended on how much I was being offered. So yeah, it was definitely a moment where I thought, okay, huh, maybe I could sell this if the price is right and be okay with directing something else. I had written a feature film version of "Arkane".

[00:06:59] Because "Arkane" was essentially, a promo if you know, a way a showcase of a feature version of that story. And that was something else that I had been shopping at the time. But once I got in those conversations and we started talking about, "Ooh, what would "The Vigil" become? It was clear that A, it wouldn't be right for "The Vigil" and B I didn't want to lose that opportunity.

[00:07:21] So, you know, I was willing to turn down essentially what could have been the very budget of the film that I made just for the script itself. I turned that down to you, make it be the first feature. It was personal enough to me that I thought, you know, I'll be fine, you know, scraping by as long as I can find somebody who will let me make this.

[00:07:41] **Bryan Smith:** That's interesting because I would imagine as a filmmaker making my way into that world, that the money has to be so enticing because you're struggling. You're trying to figure out a way to fund your own projects. And here you are given a, an offer of an amount that would allow you to pretty much fund a brand-new project, just walk away and keep going, but.

[00:08:05] **Keith Thomas:** Make something else.

[00:08:06] **Bryan Smith:** But I'm glad that you held onto it because. I think this felt like it was personal for you. And I don't know why that is because I don't know you, but it felt like it really came from a place of understanding of this community that has Siddiq Jewish community. It came from a place of understanding of horror history.

[00:08:29] And I've, I've heard you in other interviews, talk about "The Exorcist" being one of your influences, which still to this day, I think I have psychic scars from, because it's like I am a child of the seventies and I don't know why my parents let me watch that movie, but they did. And I'm still paying for it to this day, but you can really tell that this is a labor of love when you're watching this film and beautifully executed in terms of the casting.

[00:08:56] Fantastic. Let's talk about the lead character. Yeah. Dave Davis, who is this chameleon-like actor that I did not know before I watched this film, but I looked at his IMDB and he kind of reminds me and how many films he's been in and the different roles he's played. Have you ever heard of Cliff Curtis?

[00:09:17] **Keith Thomas:** Sure.

[00:09:18] **Bryan Smith:** From "Whale Rider", he kind of reminds me of Cliff Curtis in a way he has this. Like handsome lead role vibe to him, but he can do anything. And I think his comfort zone is in support roles and character acting. So how did you find him and what made him right for this role?

[00:09:40] **Keith Thomas:** You know, this, the whole story of kind of how "The Vigil" got made is very much a story of kind of serendipity and , just the things coming together, kind of out of the blue, you know, it began, like I said, I had gotten the offer for the script without my services as a director, and I turned that down and then my manager just happened to suggest to me, you know, I've got these other producers, they make horror films. That's all they make. But I think you're going to find them fascinating. They read the script. They're interested in meeting you. I went to meet with them in LA and, I walk in and they're two young guys in their twenties, Orthodox Jews with Yakamas who are in a room with just tons of horror memorabilia. And just from that moment, it was like, wow, like, who else can make this movie? Like Orthodox Jews who love horror? So, from that moment, there were just many more instances of the same sort of thing.

[00:10:32] So with casting. I had written the script with a face in my head. It's impossible when you're writing, not to put yourself in these characters. So it wasn't that I saw myself as Yakov. It was more that I just, I had an idea of who he needed to be like, what do you need to look like and feel like. We were casting, and I was talking to a lot of really good actors, actors who were either from the community or spoke Yiddish or knew the world and as amazing as they were, they, I just, wasn't finding my Yakov the, the, the kind of gut thing. And so I took a break from casting for a little bit. For like a few days, I was just like, "I can't do this anymore I need to take a break", and I happened to be flicking through Netflix or one of the streamers and came across this movie "Bomb City" in which Dave Davis plays a punk in 1980s, Texas. He's got a giant green Mohawk, but I knew two things looking at him in that number one, he just had this, he was able to wear his emotions and his expressiveness in a way that I thought, yes, that is Yakov that that's the character.

[00:11:40] That's the face. And the second thing that I knew is just we Jews know each other. And I could tell, I was like, "this guy's Jewish". I can, even with that green mohawk, I know. And I was right. And I told my producers about him. I said, "Hey, this is the kind of guy I need". Like someone who could do this and like, well, contact him.

[00:12:00] So I did, and he read the script and he has his own stories about what happened when he read the script. But he was like, yeah, I want to do this. Now Dave's like me, neither of us have Jewish names, but we both come from Jewish backgrounds and, you know, Dave really threw himself into this project far beyond what I even envisioned.

[00:12:19] He didn't know any Yiddish when he showed up. But he just threw himself into the community. He studied, um, he learned all that dialect and it is a very particular, it's not just Yiddish. It's a particular pronunciation of the Yiddish that even our advisors, people who were Hasidic, who grew up in that neighborhood, they were like blown away by what he was doing.

[00:12:40] So that's just on the technical level in terms of his pronunciation. And, but he also just embodied the thing. You know, he talks about how exhausting the shoot was in a lot of ways, it was productive, he really enjoyed it, but it was still exhausting because he was scared for those four weeks that we were shooting.

[00:12:59] He had to be able to put himself in this place. Where without much dialogue, he had to show just on his face, this sort of this terror and this struggle. And, you know, like I said, it just, I just happened to see Bob city and notice him like that. And my gut said, yeah, this is the guy. This is Yakov. And, and he, he truly became him. Couldn't have been anyone else.

[00:13:21] **Bryan Smith:** So, you, you literally just saw him and then saw this possibility, saw the potential yeah. From his role in "Bomb City".

[00:13:29] **Keith Thomas:** Yeah. And it was funny because I had heard that about casting before in terms of like this gut thing. And there were definitely, you know, you kind of struggle, you're like, well, he's going to have to learn the Yiddish. I've got another actor here who knows the Yiddish already, who knows this neighborhood who grew up like just blocks away from here. And yet I'm pushing for the guy who doesn't know the Yiddish, but my gut just told me that Dave can do this.

[00:13:55] Dave is going to throw himself into this and he can do it. And if he does that, we're going to get the performance that is beyond the kind of what we might expect. And, and I think that's what Dave did.

[00:14:07] **Bryan Smith:** Yeah, he did it with a aplomb for sure. Now, uh, what I also noticed about the film is that there's this hyper specific setting and world that you created, and I'm wondering if the hyper specificity is helpful in the context of film. In other words, the more specific it is, the more rules there are. For instance, you have religious rules and those sort of come baked into the movie. You, you have this, Shomer the Shomer rules about what you can and can't do while you're watching the body.

[00:14:45] Does that make it easier to write a story when you start very specific in terms of the characters? Their worldviews and their, specifically their religion.

[00:14:56] **Keith Thomas:** I think so I find that very liberating , weirdly enough, like when you kind of start at the very broad pay space and you say I'm going to make a supernatural horror film, and I'm going to have to invent some sort of entity or some sort of thing with the rules, it can be very unwieldy and you end up going down a lot of different paths to try to figure out, okay, well, here are these rules are the, you know, these are ones that work.

[00:15:18] These don't. If you begin in a very specific space. So, for me, it was not just the world in terms of the Hasidic world that I wanted to be as authentic as possible. And it was just me kind of replacing or moving from the exterior, into the interior things that already existed and all the baggage that came with it.

[00:15:39] But then in terms of the malevolent, thing at the center of this film, I wanted to find something real that, that, that is Rabbinical. A demon. And so, for me, that's very

helpful. A, the stuff comes with its own history. And B it kind of has its own rules that you are able to work within rather than kind of making them up.

[00:16:02] Obviously we had to make some stuff up. I had to kind of create the look of the Mazak, the demon in the film, but it's also very helpful just in terms of production for actors, you know, we, that house that we were in a real house. It was very important that everything in that house be as authentic as possible to that world down to stuff.

[00:16:21] You don't see there's stuff in drawers. And you know that that's important to me that, that Dave, if he was in a scene and opened a drawer, he wouldn't be taken out of the scene by looking in there and seeing like a Domino's flyer. You know, it'd be very specific to the world that whatever's in there. So that sort of world-building, I think is crucial to getting the atmosphere, getting the performances, but also just kind of setting up the type of story you're telling.

[00:16:49] And I prefer that sort of like taking from a real-world place and bringing it into the supernatural then kind of just whole cloth making something up and attempting to pull it off because that's years and decades, even of work, go into trying to make something that's going to feel real.

[00:17:05] **Bryan Smith:** So the next question I have pertains to the characters that you choose to be your protagonist and antagonist in a feature like this, and also in a short, like "Arkane" where I find, and this is my observation, and maybe it's just me and I'm projecting, or maybe it's a universal truth, but I find that when you have really old people or really young people, that it adds a layer of terror to a narrative potentially, because I think the older you get, the less predictable someone is, and same thing with kids, like in "The Exorcist", I think she was 12 years old at the time where she's possessed, but she's very unpredictable even when she's not possessed because she's a child and she doesn't know all the rules yet. And then, and then you have this elderly person who's kind of in the sunset of their life and maybe they're going through dementia or whatever. But they're unpredictable too. Did you think about that as you were writing this feature? Is that something that was conscious or not in your mind at all?

[00:18:10] **Keith Thomas:** No, it was definitely conscious. And I agree with you. I, I am attracted to that kind of, you know, the, the difference, the kind of counterbalance of youth and age and the psychology of it. And at the same time, it came from a personal place. I think that's why you see it in "Arkane" and in "The Vigil". In that in my career as a clinical researcher, before I embarked in filmmaking, I did for part of it, I did a drug studies in nursing homes. And so I spent a lot of time with Dementia and Alzheimer's patients; and so I witnessed firsthand kind of if you're visiting somebody every month, over the course of a year, and they're in serious cognitive decline. You end up seeing this kind of fascinating and tragic sort of change in somebody. And for me, a lot of that work showed just how fragile an identity is and a personality, which is very scary because we tend to think of ourselves as who we are, and that that's unshakeable that this is who I am because of my history.

[00:19:16] But if you take away your history, who are you, if you take away your memories, who are you? How do you know? And so. That aspect, you know, for me is just something

that was always kind of a source of both fascination and fear. And I thought that'd be, you know, I will, I have to exploring that. And so, if you have a character like that, who is unreliable because they are, you know, they've got Dementia or their mind is slipping.

[00:19:40] And you team them up with somebody who is not the person, who's the stable one to help them. You turn someone who is also at the kind of edge themselves in terms of figuring themselves out. Like that's an interesting crisis to be put in. And so that's where I thought, you know, in terms of "The Vigil".

[00:19:58] Hey, we're in a house. This, this guy who has his own struggles, who's trying to figure himself out. And the only other person that could potentially help him is not all there is, is kind of already left. So I thought, yeah, that would be really tense and make for an interesting dichotomy.

[00:20:17] **Bryan Smith:** Yeah. And then the prospective girlfriend too, trying to court him or flirting with him throughout the film. And then he can't even trust. Is it her? It's really unsettling. And I'm trying not to give too much away because I want the listeners to go in, like I did with zero expectations or understanding of, of what's going to happen.

[00:20:38] As you may have noticed there are great resources and advice mentioned in all our episodes. And for many of them, we actually collect all of these resources for you in one easy place. Our newsletter, you can go to [dream path, pod.com/newsletter](https://dreampath.pod.com/newsletter) to join. It's not fancy, just an email about each week's episode, featured artists and resources to help you on your journey. Now back to the interview.

[00:21:03] So I understand that this was in post-production during the pandemic, or at least was going to potentially be released during the pandemic. And now we are coming upon a theatrical release, or I guess I'll put that in quotes, "theatrical release", right. But streaming release. And when can we see the film streaming?

[00:21:23] **Keith Thomas:** Yeah. So, it'll be released on February 26. That'll be both VOD kind of on demand through cable suppliers and, you know, w whatever place you rent movies online, and also some theaters that will have a theatrical arm to it.

[00:21:38] You know, right. The world's been turned upside down and it's interesting with the film coming out now, it's just a very different place than it was originally. It was going to be released early in 2020, shortly after South by Southwest, where it was going to premiere, which of course canceled. So, yeah, we're finding it in a very different world. And in a world interestingly enough, when we shot the film, I think, you know, contained horror has always kind of been a thing, but it feels like today people understand being trapped in a house better than they certainly did before.

[00:22:08] **Bryan Smith:** Yeah. We're living in a contained horror. I mean, all of us at the same time. Right. So, you think it's a Renaissance happening right now though with horror films in general?

[00:22:18] **Keith Thomas:** We've definitely seen a lot of really fascinating stuff coming up in the last 10 years or so. It's kind of, one of the reasons I've been attracted to horror for a long

time was horror was a genre in which you could do a lot of different things. You know, it's, it's similar to comedy in the sense that, uh, you know, as long as it's funny, kind of no matter, you know, you could do whatever you want in a comedy.

[00:22:39] As long as the jokes are landing, you can explore all sorts of things. And in horror, it's similar. And I feel like today's audiences are really hungrier than ever before for kind of glimpses into worlds they may not be familiar with and not in terms of, you know, outer space, but you know, worlds here on earth and communities here on earth and stories from that perspective.

[00:23:02] **Bryan Smith:** "Midsommar" maybe is a good example of that.

[00:23:05] **Keith Thomas:** Yeah, exactly. You know, and, and "Get Out". And, uh, you know, these stories, "The Witch", for example, as well, but stories where the engine of scaring an audience of the thrill ride. Is the same, but you are, they're more open as long as it's scary. They're more open to getting into.

[00:23:27] "Okay. Yeah. I didn't know that" or "that looks interesting". This feels different and new. Even if some of the tropes of the horror film are the same, you know, in terms of. You know, what's happening. There's some familiar framework, but you can really explore other, you know, other perspectives in a way that I think a lot of genres you can't, it's, it's difficult. So horror is very open to that and very flexible.

[00:23:51] **Bryan Smith:** Yeah, I love that about horror films and, and also, I don't know, psychological thrillers too, but "Midsommar", I wouldn't call that a horror movie necessarily.

[00:24:00] **Keith Thomas:** Right.

[00:24:01] **Bryan Smith:** But it does drop you into a world. You know, nothing I seen about you've never heard about before and similarly with "The Vigil", I think probably, yeah. 95% of the audience is probably going to be. Like, wow. This is just as foreign to them as "Midsommar"'s world would be because that community is pretty insulated, and you really don't know a lot about that community.

[00:24:27] **Keith Thomas:** Yeah. Yeah, they're very, what's I find fascinating about the community is that they are this right, very insular community, they speak their own, you know, their language. They're not into it acting so much with the secular world. And yet they're living in the largest city in the United States. You know, this is a community that is right there in Brooklyn. Which is fascinating because you can, you know, be in the community, they walk a few blocks and you're out completely, you know, it's, it's this thing that's very tight knit and yet very of its own time and place. And so, it's interesting seeing how much interest there has been in the Hasidic community with shows like unorthodox and things kind of appearing where there's, I dunno, I dunno where that comes from. I don't know why suddenly there is this huge interest in it, but it seemed to me we'd never seen a horror film set there. We'd never seen a horror film kind of deal with these sorts of things. So it felt like a unique opportunity to kind of dive in to something that I was somewhat familiar with or familiar enough that I could write about it.

[00:25:25] **Bryan Smith:** I'd like to ask you one more question before we move on to other projects about "The Vigil". Now there's a hate crime element to the film that is pretty compelling involving a small boy, and I'm wondering if you felt like you needed that plot point to add an emotional element or at least get to know this protagonist a little better and understand his perspective of why he may be, I guess the trauma that he's coming into the scenes with.

[00:25:58] **Keith Thomas:** Yeah. You know that sort of developed out of this idea of why would somebody leave? Like why leave the community? What's a, what's a cinematic interesting angle on that. And there are, of course, many of, you know, many different stories. I spoke with lots of different ex Hasidic people about why they left and what those stories, when you see some of those people in the movies, certainly in the beginning, when they're all sitting around a table, all of those folks, you know, with a couple exceptions are ex Hasidic and left for various reasons.

[00:26:26] So I had to come up with something that was cinematic in terms of visceral in that it was powerful enough that it would make somebody leave, that they didn't feel like they were getting what they needed. And they had to look somewhere else at the same time. It was something that I witnessed myself. So it came from a real space.

[00:26:43] When I lived in New York city, I saw an incident similar to this. It was not as extreme. It did not end the same way, but it was shocking. And, you know, in some ways it's me exercising my own personal demons because when I witnessed this, I was frozen. I didn't do anything about it. It was on a busy street.

[00:27:01] No one did anything about it. It happened. And then everyone just kind of moved on, and I felt really guilty about it that I didn't stand up for this child in this sort of incident. And so as part of this is me sort of exercising my own demons in terms of carrying around the guilt, overseeing that, even though it was many, many years ago.

[00:27:20] **Bryan Smith:** Wow.

[00:27:21] **Keith Thomas:** So, so yeah, so you kind of has multiple angles, uh, in terms of how it got there.

[00:27:27] **Bryan Smith:** Now I understand that Stephen King watched "The Vigil" and has anointed you, or are at least approved of you being attached to a remake of "Firestarter". Yes. So how does that feel to have that type of validation from a giant in the horror world?

[00:27:45] Like Stephen king?

[00:27:46] **Keith Thomas:** Yeah, no, I mean, it's great. It's, you know, one of those stories, we hear this a lot from filmmakers, but when I made "The Vigil", I was just trying to make the best movie that I could given what I had. And I had a vision for the film in my head, and I tried to come as close to realizing that vision is as possible, but I had no expectations beyond that.

[00:28:05] It wasn't like, okay, this is I'm going to make this movie. And then I'm going to move on to this thing. And then this thing, and I just get, you know, whatever. So everything that happened afterwards in terms of getting it to Toronto international film festival and, you know, getting the attention of folks, like Jason, Blum and Blumhouse, um, and then being, you know, first discussing "Firestarter", um, and then, you know, being attached to "Firestarter" and we're hoping to film it this year.

[00:28:29] That's all been, been incredible. And at the same time, you know, I've been offered a lot of different projects after "The Vigil" had its premiere, but "Firestarter" was one that, again, this spoke personally to me, it was a book that I read as a kid. It was one of the first Stephen King books I read. And again, it had had a lot of these personal connections.

[00:28:49] Like I said, I was in clinical research and did drugs too. The core of "Firestarter" as a drug study, the lot six study that goes all sorts of awry and essentially gives birth to Charlie, the pyrokinetic kid. So, you know, I knew that world and there were just so many different ins. So yeah, it was, I never expected it, but it's been really exciting and even more what's been great about it is the, you know, Blumhouse and universal trusting my vision for what "Firestarter" my kind of version of "Firestarter" could be that I think is both very, very true to the book, but different that that's going to feel fresh and new in terms of, you know, what you'd expect in a, in a fire starter adaptation.

[00:29:34] **Bryan Smith:** Are you going to bring back, uh, drew at some capacity?

[00:29:37] **Keith Thomas:** You know, I can't say, but I think, you know, we've got a really amazing cast.

[00:29:44] And, you know, it's, it's one of those things where the sort of the thing that I liked most about making "The Vigil" is the, the tension and kind of this visceral sort of emotional thing. And that's very much true in "Firestarter". I think you could, you could easily look at kind of on the surface of "Firestarter" of a little girl being chased by the shop.

[00:30:04] On the run with her dad for a large portion of it, but there's a lot of meat there too. There's a, there's a very, sort of fascinating emotional core of the movie, which is about Parenthood, about how you raise a child. So they don't become a monster hand. And in reverse, how do you as a child navigate Parenthood when, when your parents are on the run and you were kind of living in this underground life.

[00:30:29] **Bryan Smith:** So, tons of great stuff in it, So this is a studio film then for the universals involved. Okay. So, you went straight from indie horror filmmaker to big budget studio filmmaker. How does that feel?

[00:30:44] **Keith Thomas:** You know, it it's here's so here's the nice thing about it is it's not, it doesn't feel at least so far as that much of a leap because either the way Blumhouse operates is they really let the filmmaker's kind of vision guide them in terms of it. So, it feels more Indy in the sense of kind of how it comes together, even though it has a studio distribution, a studio backing it, you know, the studio, very involved in the property and kind of what this film looks like. It's still small in the sense that you know, there's a lot of

filmmaker control in terms of the look and the feel and what we're going for and you know, maybe taking some risks, which, which I love.

[00:31:25] **Bryan Smith:** Is that what Blumhouse offers to the equation is that that sort of small house indie feel because that's my impression and looking at, I don't know much about Blumhouse, but they just have this vibe of being an indie film, like love of horror movie operation.

[00:31:43] **Keith Thomas:** Yeah, an indie film operation that is just, you know, really excited by interesting stories and has found a lot of success in horror, and kind of pushing horror in new directions. So yeah, you know, you definitely get that feel in terms of. It's very much kind of one-on-one, it's not so much a, a machine as it is just very committed people who want to make the most interesting kind of best stories that they can and work with people who share that sort of enthusiasm. So, you know, a good, a good partnership for sure.

[00:32:16] **Bryan Smith:** So, for folks who are trying to break into the film world, I understand that you did not go to film school, correct.

[00:32:22] **Keith Thomas:** Right, right.

[00:32:23] **Bryan Smith:** And you just started writing screenplays. At least that's what I gathered from prior interviews. So, tell my listeners if you could, and we were running out of time, but what advice would you give them?

[00:32:35] If they want to make films and write screenplays and get their foot in the door in this world?

[00:32:43] **Keith Thomas:** Yeah, my advice is probably don't follow my path because I took a super circuitous, very weird path to get here, but for me, so I wrote scripts for almost a decade, most of which, you know, you were never made into anything certainly that you'd know or recognize, and while I got paid for that work, it still wasn't the, you know, getting to the state that I wanted to be at in terms of actually becoming a filmmaker. So for me, it was making something. The key was making "Arkane". The key was kind of putting my money where my mouth was and, you know, making a short film doesn't actually cost that much.

[00:33:24] You can do it, especially with today's technology for very little. It's the idea, it's the execution that, that takes, you know, a lot, but you know, if you make something that is true to what you, your vision. That isn't you just mimicking things. You've seen your favorite films or scenes that you're stitching together as a fan of other work, but as something that you have to make, something that you are driven to make that it's, you know, you're kind of, it's possessed you and you have to create this thing.

[00:33:55] If you take the time and look. Your first script, you have all the time in the world. There's, nobody's waiting for you to deliver for your first script, rewrite it to death, get it perfect before you show it to anybody. And the same goes for, you know, making your first short. You have all the time in the world to get it ready.

[00:34:12] Don't bother shopping things around or sending things until it's ready and then just go there and make it actions speak louder than words in this industry. More than any.

[00:34:22] **Bryan Smith:** Now for listeners who are interested in seeing your first film project "Arkane", go to YouTube. It's "A R K A N E". Very easy to find on YouTube.

[00:34:32] It's like seven or eight minutes long. Yeah. And it was gripping. I mean, I have to be honest with you. I'll be very honest with you, Keith, when people send me links to their shorts, I have this sense of dread because there's so many really bad shorts out there and that's not because of their bad filmmakers. I think it's just really hard to pull off something that is a compelling narrative in that short period of time on the budget that they have. So what was your budget on "Arkane"?

[00:35:01] **Keith Thomas:** So "Arkane" all told was I think 15,000, which, you know, it was sizeable. We had a crew and we had lots of Dolly tracks and a pretty good camera and you know, a lot of stuff, but, you know, and, and, and the other thing I'd say is that's 15,000 I'm not getting back right now, buying a short film.

[00:35:20] **Bryan Smith:** Right.

[00:35:20] **Keith Thomas:** But it paid off in "The Vigil" and it paid off in "Firestarter". So it was worth it. You know, I had convinced my wife to let us to let me use some of our savings for that. And she, you know, her reaction was yeah, that you, we can do it, but you better do it right.

[00:35:37] You'd better get it right. Yeah. And you know, for what it is, it was effective, and it did what it needed to do. And it kind of staked my claim in terms of like, okay, this is, this is me. This is my voice. And luckily people responded to it.

[00:35:53] **Bryan Smith:** And that's what opened the door to "The Vigil" then to be able to make "The Vigil"?

[00:35:56] **Keith Thomas:** Yeah. Essentially, that's what had happened. I had, you know, I had had representation as a screenwriter and I'm a novelist as well. And so I kind of had these inroads, but I wasn't getting what I wanted. And so I kind of stripped everything away and I made "Arkane" here in Colorado where I live with an entirely Colorado crew and then when it was done and it was ready, I sent it back to the connections I had in Hollywood and I don't know what I'm not talking like super famous people. I'm just talking, you know, people who worked as execs or whoever at various companies. And through that, yeah. "Arkane" is how I met my manager. And then that is how I met the producers, of "The Vigil". That's how I made "The Vigil", my agents, and then "Firestarter" and beyond. So. Yeah, well, that was it. It was just though that eight-minute short film was basically worth 10 years of screenwriting that I had done.

[00:36:50] **Bryan Smith:** Amazing. Mm. So do you consider the short, well, any short of this caliber, like "Arkane", I mean, it looks like a big budget film for seven or eight minutes. Do you consider this to be kind of a business card in terms of like, here's my street cred, like, look what I can do?

[00:37:07] **Keith Thomas:** Yeah.

[00:37:07] **Bryan Smith:** You gave me the tools.

[00:37:08] **Keith Thomas:** Yeah. And you know, it's, it's amazing. It's, it's, you know, it kind of ebbs and flows where this becomes a kind of thing, but I've seen short films that are two to three minutes long, like very short that are not in festivals that are made entirely as calling cards. And that have been, have been a hundred percent effective.

[00:37:28] For me, I didn't go to film school. So, I really, outside of screenwriting, I didn't know how things work. So it was, you know, there was a lot of on-set learning for me in terms of being a producer and a writer and director of "Arkane" and kind of just figuring out the ropes and I just dove into it for six months and, you know, for a two-day shoot, but got that.

[00:37:47] But, you know, for folks who have gone to film school who understand production and know how these things function. Yeah. That can be the calling card. You know, I've taught at film school and, you know, if your thesis or whatever you make kind of that, that should be it. Like you've got the opportunity right there.

[00:38:05] You know, the school's paying for it. You've got the, the equipment that should be your calling card. And you can use that.

[00:38:11] **Bryan Smith:** When you were screenwriting, how did you find your community of people that you would use as mentors and just for ideas and bouncing ideas off of, and basically your tribe? Where did you find those folks being from Colorado?

[00:38:27] **Keith Thomas:** You know what it really came down to just one person, just a good friend of mine that I'd known for a while, who we had the same tastes who had gone to film school incidentally. And so I would, I'd bring him kind of some of my stuff and say, "Hey, what do you know? What do you think? You're the film school guy, you understand more of the structure stuff."

[00:38:45] And so it was both him educating me and then me kind of learning to. Take creatively what I had in mind and put it through that thing. So, no, I mean, he's still kind of my right-hand man today and I bounce everything off of him and that was it. It was just that just the one person. If I had been in LA, you know, most likely I would have gone to meetings and found folks at cafes.

[00:39:08] You know, you go to, you throw a rock in a cafe in LA, you're gonna hit us screenwriter. Um, so they're, there

[00:39:13] **Bryan Smith:** And a podcaster too.

[00:39:15] **Keith Thomas:** A Podcaster! Probably both.

[00:39:16] **Bryan Smith:** Yeah.

[00:39:17] **Keith Thomas:** They're the same person. So, yeah, no is very invaluable. Shout outs to Jonah. He knows who he is.

[00:39:24] **Bryan Smith:** Okay, right on. So, I have to ask this when you have "Firestarter" in the can and you're ready to premiere.

[00:39:32] I would love to talk to you again and reconnect and just, yeah, for sure. See how that project went and I wish you all the best as you shoot that film hopefully in 2021.

[00:39:42] **Keith Thomas:** Yeah, thanks so much. No, that'll be fun.

[00:39:45] **Bryan Smith:** Keith Thomas, thanks for being on the podcast.

[00:39:47] **Keith Thomas:** Thanks for having me.

[00:39:49] **Bryan Smith:** Hey, thank you for listening and I hope you enjoy today's episode. If so I have a favorite ask. Can you go to wherever you listen to podcasts and leave me a review? Your feedback is what keeps this podcast going. You can also check us out on Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook with the handle @dreampathpod, and as always, go find your dream path.