

Story of 'Jack' as weird as Lynch flick

By ALISON MACOR

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A mix-up at a Los Angeles temp agency landed filmmaker Chris Leavens his first documentary — and his first brush with blackmail.

Leavens' film, "I Don't Know Jack," profiles the late actor Jack Nance, best known for his role as the hypnotic Henry in David Lynch's cult favorite "Eraserhead." But as the documentary reveals, Nance's performance in Lynch's first feature was only the tip of the iceberg in terms of the actor's career, which ended with his death in 1997 from injuries sustained after a beating outside a Pasadena, Calif., doughnut shop. The perpetrators were never caught.

The film screens at 7 and 9:30 p.m. Wednesday at the Alamo Drafthouse Cinema as part of the Texas Documentary Tour. Leavens and executive producer Richard Green will be in attendance.

The behind-the-scenes story of how Leavens made "I Don't Know Jack" has the kind of weirdness you might find in a Lynch film. "That's just the way my life works," Leavens said.

A graduate of Penn State University's film department, Leavens moved to Los Angeles in 1998 to pursue filmmaking. A temp agency mistakenly sent him to Next



Jack Nance: 'Eraserhead' star was killed in 1997.

See Movie's, E4

Texas Documentary Tour: 'I Don't Know Jack'

When: 7 and 9:30 p.m. Wednesday

Where: Alamo Drafthouse, 409 Colorado St.

Tickets: \$6 general admission, \$4 for Austin Film Society, KLRU members

Information: 322-0145 or

www.austinfilm.org

Visit www.jacknance.com

Movie's master tapes were held for ransom

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Step Studios, where he met Green, the production company's owner and an actor. He most recently appeared as the magician in Lynch's "Mulholland Drive."

Leavens' work as an assistant for Next Step put him into contact with many of Green's friends, an extensive group of actors, writers and other creative types who first met in a theater company in the 1970s. When Leavens discovered that they had all worked with Nance, and he heard their lively stories about the actor, he suggested to Green that Nance's life story would make an interesting documentary.

"I always felt that there was a film in this group of people," says Green during a phone conversation from his studio in Los Angeles. "By putting somebody outside 'the family' on the film as a director, we wouldn't end up with a puff piece."

Green made himself an executive producer to remain somewhat distanced from the project. Production began in 1999 and Leavens had a first cut by November 2000. Then, a friend of Nance's who was involved with the project stole the production's master tapes on Thanksgiving Day.

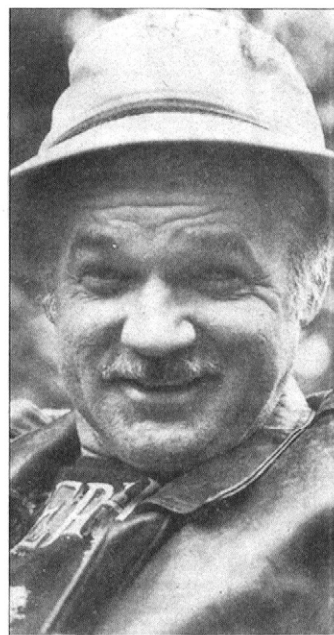
"At some point this person started feeling embattled and blamed Chris for being distanced from the project," Green said.

Green and Leavens say the person ransomed the tapes for four months and finally agreed to return the material in exchange for \$2,000. When Leavens and Green checked some of the original 30-minute interview tapes upon their return, however, they discovered bags of rice in place of the actual Beta-format tapes.

"It was pretty crazy," says Leavens of the incident. "I was pretty naive to how everything worked."

In the documentary, the comments of Nance's friends and family members shed some light on his life and career.

In his interview, Lynch refers to Nance as an "actor's actor." Nance worked extensively in the theater, and he also appeared as Pete Martell in Lynch's television series, "Twin Peaks." Although he may be



Comments by friends and family members of actor Jack Nance, above, help 'show who this man was truly,' says documentarian Chris Leavens.

remembered for his starring role in "Eraserhead," he mostly played supporting characters. Friend and fellow actor Charlotte Stewart describes those roles as side dishes that complement the main course. "Someone has to be the fruit salad," she says in the documentary.

As Nance's friend, Green was concerned that the actor's memory be protected in the documentary, but Leavens had another goal in mind. "I wanted to show who this man was truly," he says.

The film's title refers to the fact that of all the people involved with the project, Leavens was the only one who hadn't known Nance personally. But Green insists the title has other meanings.

"In some ways all of these people knew him intimately, but in some ways all of these people don't know Jack," he says of their ultimate inability to save Nance from his own demons or solve the mystery surrounding his death. "They can't answer the questions. They just don't know."