

Get some toothpicks! How not to lose your head while performing a demon decapitation.

By Keifer Dallison (on set SPFX Technician, *Wynonna Earp* Season 2)

“CHOP! Blood spatters as Ewan's axe falls, cutting Ronnie's head clean off, rolling to Ewan's feet. From Ronnie's neck a TENDRIL OF BLACK, a la the Black tendrils from the tentacle rises, then dissipates in a smattering of evil embers.

Ewan picks up Ronnie's head by the hair, and pulls off his hood. REVEAL his young and handsome face. He grins. “

-John Callaghan, (Writer) Episode 205 of Wynonna Earp



Doing practical special effects is a messy business. Pulling off a good gag often requires hours of planning, building, testing and perfecting. When it works well, it's fantastic. You can feel the energy of an effective gag on set. Something gross will inspire revulsion in the cast and crew. An effective explosion will warrant applause. It's what we live for.

Unfortunately, despite everyone's best efforts, things don't always go smoothly. The speed of filmmaking is fast and dirty. Frequently, there is not enough time for sufficient planning and testing of specific effects. Certain factors cannot be accounted for, and occasionally, we fail. The decapitation during the opening of Episode 205 was very nearly one of these failures.

So here's the scene:

We are in the fire hall, the home base of The Wardens, an ancient order of demon hunters. They are dragging Ronnie, a demon in disguise as a normal looking human, onto a chopping block. They do some chanting. Ronnie pleads his innocence. The wardens aren't hearing it. Ronnie's eyes turn black, revealing his demonic nature. They whack his head off with an axe. Black demon goo spews everywhere. Ewan picks up the head. Ewan shows the audience what a dreamboat he is. Ewan drops the head. The Wardens go for nachos. End Teaser.

So let's break down this gag into its elements:

- Silicone Head: cast from the actor's head and sculpted to show demon eyes and a brutal axe wound
- Shaking Body: A steel frame with joints and pneumatics to simulate the writhing of Ronnie's body as he is placed on the chopping block.
- Decapitation: The head was attached to the body via a steel plate in the head and an electromagnet in the body. When the axe hit, the electromagnet would disengage and the head would plummet to earth
- Black Demon Blood: A manifold was built into the neck stump of our body. It was plumbed to a pressurized reservoir full of demon blood. The blood was a mixture of glucose, surfactant, water-based lubricant, and water soluble black pigment.
- Chopping Block: A "wild" section was built into the chopping block for us to hide our hoses and wires.

As I previously stated, hours of preparation were put into this effect including welding steel skeletons, casting heads, wiring and plumbing pneumatics. It's a multistage process that requires application and expertise from every member of the team. When it came time to shoot, everything was tested and worked as planned. So where did things go wrong?

For economic reasons, a real working fire hall was used as our set. We always try to be careful when shooting on location. We are guests wherever we go, and we need to respect the spaces that we use. A location survey was performed and the specifics of our scenes were discussed with the fire department. Special attention was paid to the spilling of the black demon blood. The fire hall had recently had the floors done, but we were told it would not be an issue, just as long as everything was cleaned up afterwards. We hired a professional cleaning service, an added precaution in the event that our demon blood didn't wash up as well as intended.

It is a common practice to save the complex pieces until the end of the shooting day. This means, should there be any hang ups with the effect, you won't have to worry about the rest of the coverage suffering. As an effects person, this puts a lot of pressure on you, because you are usually left with the smallest window of time to operate.

We show up. We prepare. We wait. The crew shoots everything except our work. We decide to shoot the piece where Ewan holds up the head before the decapitation. We bring in the head. The head goes through a Hair/Make-up session to match the actor. We dress a little bit of blood on it. Roll sound. Talk talk talk. Ewan drops head. CLANK! The metal plate pops right out of the head...

This is a big problem. The head is made of molded silicone. Nothing sticks to silicone EXCEPT silicone. Gluing is not an option. The only thing that I can think to do on the fly is sew it back into position, creating a spider web of thread to hold the plate in. Not pretty, but it holds.

With the close-ups complete, it's time for the decapitation. We bring in our pneumatic dummy, our vessel of demon blood, and our field-repaired head. We set everything up. We connect all of the hoses. We take our positions.

We want to make sure that our work cuts together with the footage of the real actor, so we review the previous shots; turns out the actor playing Ronnie was motionless in the seconds leading up to the axe chop. This means all of the pneumatic puppet work that we had planned becomes unnecessary. If the dummy moved, the shots would not cut together properly.

Hot on the heels of that little revelation, we got another bomb dropped on us. One of the firefighters on duty had gotten a peek at our black blood mixture. He was skeptical as to the washability of the substance. The demon blood looks a lot like used motor oil. I explained to him what was in it, and that we had professional cleaners with a steam truck standing by to handle the mess. He thought about it, but ultimately stopped us. His concern was safety related. He feared residue from the demon blood would reduce traction on the concrete floor, leading to a dangerous situation for the firefighters. As guests in his fire hall, all we can do is oblige. He was fully within his rights to stop us from coating his floors in black.

With our gag reduced down to the electromagnetic head removal, we were ready to shoot. We roll sound. The axe comes down. The mark was missed on the first swing, with the blow landing around the middle of the head. On the down swing, the fake axe collided with the concrete floor, snapping the handle. The head hit the ground. Clank! The steel plate breaks loose again.

In a frenzy, I start sewing. We need another take, and everything is broken. Our Director April Mullen makes a suggestion: "Get some toothpicks."

Her idea is to connect the head to the body with toothpicks, adding enough structure to allow our steel plate to remain attached, then cut through those toothpicks with a real axe. It *kind of* worked. It wasn't perfect, but it was something. We called wrap, packed up, and went home with our tails between our legs.

Months later, the scene was going to be reshot in the studio so we got to try the decapitation again. The steel plate in the head was re-enforced. And we got to use the bleeding aspect of the effect. It worked well, and the results should be apparent in the episode.

Ultimately, the lesson is that no matter how much you plan, there are going to be factors that are out of your control. When creating one-off creatures, prosthetics or other gags, you're making prototypes if the budget and time isn't there to modify until an item or effect is perfect. Proper planning and preparation prevent poor performance, but there are no guarantees. It's probably a good idea to have some toothpicks in your back pocket.

For more insight into the behind the scenes of the special effects on Season 2 of *Wynonna Earp*, follow our Bleeding Art Industries blog at <https://bleedingartindustries.wordpress.com/>.