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# THE DARK SIDE

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# DANTE'S PLAYGROUND

**Cult director Dante Tomaselli returns with *Satan's Playground*, starring - among others - *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre's* Ed Neal. *The DarkSide's* Calam Waddell caught up with filmmaker and actor for this illuminating chat.**

When *The DarkSide* catches up with Dante Tomaselli he is in understandably high spirits - with his latest picture, *Satan's Playground*, due to be released in America later this year by genre maestros Anchor Bay (with a UK debut to follow sometime afterwards). Tomaselli, a genuinely independent filmmaker who has so far experienced cult success with two distinct low budget features (1999's visually imaginative *Desecration* and 2002's excellent *Horror*) is obviously on the way to bigger and better things.

Indeed, *Satan's Playground* seems to indicate the start of this, with a superior cast, decent production values and advance hype that paints it as one of 2006's most accomplished shockers. Best of all, for loyal horror buffs, is the appearance of such cult names as *Sleepaway Camp's* Felissa Rose, *The Evil Dead's* Ellen Sandweiss and - best of all - *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre's* hitchhiker Ed Neal.

Explaining the story to *Satan's Playground*, the ever humble Tomaselli reveals, "I usually describe *Satan's Playground* like it's a sugar-coated candy apple... with a razor blade inside (laughs).

"It has a black heart. I wanted to give the movie the aura of a deranged fairy tale, like one of those Grimm Brothers stories. It's about a vacationing family lost in New

Jersey's infamous Pine Barrens region, an area of land that stretches over 1 million acres. This is where the Jersey Devil is supposed to lurk - a bloodthirsty creature and a legend that is as old as the land itself.

"According to rumours, in 1735, a witch-like woman, known as Mrs. Leeds, was pregnant with her 13th child. The mysterious old woman, sensing it an unlucky child, cursed it and went on to give birth to a deformity... a mutation, with razor sharp claws and wings. It flew out the chimney and escaped into the woods. The legend always chilled me because, like Big Foot and the Loch Ness Monster, there are hundreds of documented cases of alleged sightings.

"Growing up, I would spend my summers at the Jersey shore, very close to those scary, never-ending trees and you couldn't pay me any amount of money to enter that frightening forest, especially at night. As a little boy, I would fantasise and scare myself imagining making a horror movie in the Pine Barrens... So, fast forward to the future and here I am talking to you!"

As for how *Satan's Playground* will differ from his previous work, Tomaselli mentions, "*Satan's Playground* is a lot more straightforward, story-wise. It doesn't skip around all over time like my last two films. There are some intense shocks but this is fun in a twisted way. Visually, it's somewhat similar to my last films, although I believe it is still a step up. I think anyone who knows of my work would recognise it as a movie I've directed... they would identify that in a split second.

"I like to pack each frame with a lot of detail, like a painting. *Satan's Playground* is less solemn than *Desecration* and *Horror* and it has a faster pace. I would describe it as more of a popcorn horror movie... but laced with LSD (laughs).

"Technically, it's definitely more polished than *Desecration* and *Horror*. I love working with Super 16 mm film because it saturates the colours so well, especially since I tend to back light everything to the hilt. I can get that



glowing, electrified image I'm craving. Because of the somewhat higher budget on *Satan's Playground*, I used a lot more lights and just had a much bigger crew in general. Plus, I was able to work with some fancy high-tech cranes and in some cases I even had two cameras rolling at once - and that is a first for me! I also had an almost unlimited supply of atmospherics, every kind of fog, mist and haze you can imagine."

With a role in the original *Texas Chain Saw Massacre* that, effectively, makes him horror movie royalty - readers may be surprised to learn that Ed Neal was actually one of the last to get involved with *Satan's Playground*, and his casting was something of an accident!

"Well originally they wanted Michael Berryman from *The Hills Have Eyes*, but he couldn't do it because of scheduling conflicts," admits Neal when *The DarkSide* catches up with him. "So I had worked on a little movie in Kansas with Felissa Rose called *Zombiageddon* and Felissa turned to Dante and said, 'You know what, you should



Dante Tomaselli prepares for shooting...



really get Ed Neal, the Hitchhiker from **The Texas Chain Saw Massacre**. He's really funny and he's very scary too."

So Dante said, "Well I'd love to – but what are the chances of getting in touch with him?" and Felissa says, "Well I have his phone number" (laughs). So Dante called me and said, "Would you like to do a film with Felissa Rose?" I said, "Man I would eat hot ice cream in August outside with Felissa Rose. I think the world of her. She is a terrific, terrific person. Just tell me where and when?"

Not that the experience of filming **Satan's Playground** was all fun and games for the actor. "I went up to New Jersey where the shoot was," explains Neal. "Now I'm from Texas, and a cold day for us is 94 degrees. I'm up in New Jersey and it's at nine! So I'm going. I am not getting out of this van. I could do 39, maybe. I could discuss 29 for a lot of money. But there is no possible way I can do 19 degrees – and there is no way in hell I can do nine!"

"I mean, if your blood is as thin as a native Texan's then it congeals within your veins at that temperature and you can't walk or breathe or feel your fingertips (laughs). So these New Jersey crew members are like,

'Hey man c'mon – get outta the car.' It was just brutal. It was so cold the birds were walking – it was too cold for them to fly (laughs)."

Shooting **Satan's Playground** on a budget of \$500,000, Tomaselli is insistent on distancing himself and his work from the current slate of big studio remakes. "Against all odds, with little support from the mainstream, you have to consider that I've somehow created more feature films than Rob Zombie or Eli Roth," he states. "And among the horror intelligentsia... my movies are considered to be just as good or even sometimes better, especially when you consider the low budgets I've worked with."

Not that Tomaselli is keeping an eye out for what is hip in the world of horror. "I know nothing of Rob Zombie or Eli Roth's work," he says. "I hear their names all the time but I'm not familiar with their films. I never even watched **Saw**. I like whipping out the old stuff. I mean, in terms of the new stuff... I'm mostly against remakes – and you see a lot of them these days. Most of these remakes are soulless with an emphasis on spoon feeding the audience. Some delusional producers out there in Hollywood are demanding that these movies be pumped up with CGI effects. If I



was to do a remake, I'd like to do a remake of a film like **The House of Whipcord**."

Of course, putting a whole host of cult splatter names in a horror feature appears to be the in thing for genre directors following the success of Rob Zombie's **House of 1000 Corpses** and **The Devil's Rejects**.

"Rob Zombie? I've honestly never seen any of his films," admits Tomaselli. "In fact, I contacted Ellen Sandweiss a few years ago because we were both featured on the cover of **Rue Morgue** magazine and I found out she was touring conventions with **The Ladies of the Evil Dead**. I thought, 'Well here's my chance to reach out to her' and I did."

"Ed Neal did come to me out-of-the-blue, as you know. I was supposed to have Michael Berryman in a role but at the very last second, there were scheduling conflicts and I only had a small window of time to shoot the film. It was heartbreaking, because I really wanted to work with Michael, but it didn't seem in the cards for this particular film."

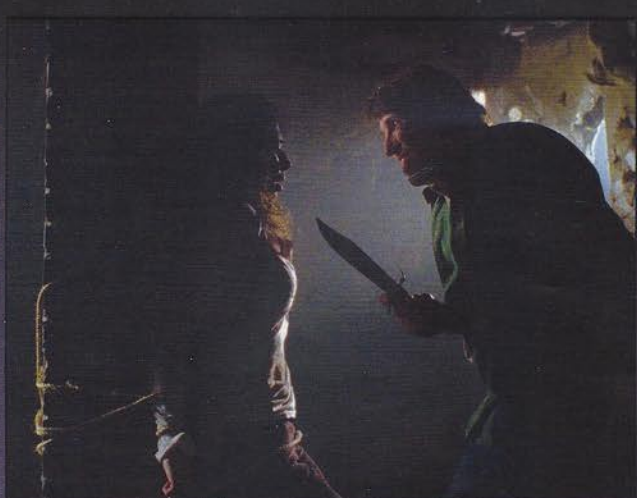
"Felissa kept on saying, 'Edwin Neal. Contact him – he'd be perfect.' Of course I worship **The Texas Chain Saw Massacre** and his portrayal as The Hitchhiker, is hands down, one of the most frightening performances of all time. When we met and worked together, we developed a bond and I can promise you that Edwin Neal and I will work together on many more horror movies. As for Felissa herself – I think it was just destiny that I should work with Angela from **Sleepaway Camp** (laughs). Felissa Rose made such an impression on me with her mystical performance in that movie and I felt such a connection with her."

In **Satan's Playground**, Neal plays a character known solely as Boy – a psychotic, mysterious character that the actor is happy to divulge some details about. "He's kind of whacked out... it is hinted that it may be because of in-breeding," laughs Neal.

"He's definitely not well but we're not sure why. But his mother, who is played by an incredible actress called Irma St. Paule, can really effectively communicate with him. He can't talk, but he can understand things on the most primal of levels – so when mother, who does all these heinous things... when she needs some muscle, she opens the basement door and says, 'Boy, get up here. We need you.' If there is someone a little tough, usually she can still find a way of killing them, but if they are too aware, too big or too strong for her then she just says, 'Well I'll get Boy to kill them.' I'm the muscle in the basement – and I sleep on a little straw mat."

"Boy can be sitting real quiet at night, sweet and nice or he can kill five people at any given moment. He can just go off at any second. I really like that in a character – where you do not know what he is going to do or why, because he does not need the linear reasons that a normal person does, it always fun to play a character like that."

Asked about making a comparison between Boy and the Hitchhiker, Neal explains, "Oh, now what was that wonderful phrase? A London film critic said it about **Chain Saw** and I had it framed for many years until someone stole it from my wall. I had the part where he had reviewed me, blown up and highlighted in yellow and framed... it said, (puts on a snotty accent) 'Never in the



annals of film history have I seen a more insidious lout! I was just, 'Oh my God, I'm in an insidious lout! I have never been called that before.'"

"Then he said, 'Well I just found it morally reprehensible! Well I love being morally reprehensible! So, yeah, they are both morally reprehensible because neither one of them has any clue what the right thing is. They could have been cousins. Not brothers because they are too different – but definitely cousins from the same inbreeding group.'"

"One part of the family broke off and moved to Texas and that's how you got the Hitchhiker, the other ones stayed in Jersey – and at family reunions they are probably always trying to kill each other (laughs). You know what a redneck is? Well, the last words – usually – that a redneck says is 'Hey y'all watch this' and then he will do something totally stupid and kill himself. So that would have been the last thing that the Hitchhiker would have said before he threw his knife at Boy, and it would no doubt miss, bounce off a board, fly back at him and get stuck in his head. That's the sort of dumb things rednecks do."

With **Satan's Playground** making its premiere on DVD, Tomaselli states that he is not disappointed that the feature – outside of some festival screenings – never made it to the theatres.

"Anchor Bay is the greatest horror distributor out there," maintains the director. "I feel safe with them and it's all very political, getting your independent film released theatrically. It's like winning the lottery if it happens. I've had the good fortune of working with the top DVD distributors out there such as Image Entertainment, Elite Entertainment and now with Anchor Bay. I've made absolutely no compromises and had 100% creative control on all my films. I wouldn't sell my soul for a wide theatrical release because I know it's going to happen naturally."

Certainly, Neal is full of praise for his **Satan's Playground** director. "Dante is very reluctant to sell out, he is very old school,"

boasts the actor. "You can tell that when you talk to him and when you work with him. He really has seen a lot of old films and paid attention. That was his college. He is a student and I mean that in the best possible terms, I just love working with him. As for the DVD release – I think it is going to do quite well, because it has all these great elements in it. Dante did a bang up job and they had a good director of photography. It looks really good and it's scary and it's fun. There are great performances and it has a lot going for it. I just wish it had a wider theatrical distribution."

Speaking to the good-humored Neal, it is difficult to associate the veteran performer with his role in one of the most notorious hor-

ror movies ever made. An experienced comedian, the actor tends to break into impressions and is never short of a joke – something he is all too aware of.

"When people meet me at a convention and I'm signing them an autograph, the amount of times I'm told, 'My God, I never dreamed that you would ever be this funny!'" laughs the actor. "Well funny is where I make most of my money because I make silly commercials and I dub Japanese anime. I was even asked on **Saturday Night Live** once but I ever had any desire to go do that. I thought about it once in a while but I'm too laid back. A lot of native Texans are laid back, but we just don't get too excited by stuff. I would have moved to LA years ago if I wanted that kind of existence but I didn't."

Neal is also going to be in Tomaselli's next film – called **The Ocean**. "Yeah, I'm going to go down to Puerto Rico and make that with Dante. My character is a blood soaked nun! That's going to get an R-rating huh?" laughs the actor.

"Lynn Lowry and Margot Kidder will also be in **The Ocean**" adds Tomaselli. "Margot read the script and really wanted to do it. I'm a big fan of **Sisters**, **Black Christmas** and of course **The Amityville Horror**. Felissa Rose will play her daughter in the film and I also have Judith O'Dea from **Night of the Living Dead** on board in a starring role as a scuba diver. Plus, there will be cameos by Tom Atkins, from **Creepshow** and **Halloween 3**, and Ellen Sandweiss too. It's a movie about killer waves and the cleansing of the earth's sins... It's about the end of the world... the ocean itself revolting. There's a deadly Ebola-like virus spreading along a coastal community in Puerto Rico. In some ways, **The Ocean** is my zombie horror movie."

And with a pitch like that, just how can you resist?



Dante with **The Evil Dead's** Ellen Sandweiss