

# DANTE'S INFERNO

Venture into the "Torture Chamber" for another shot of director Dante Tomaselli's surreal religious horror.

By CHRIS ALEXANDER

New Jersey-reared filmmaker/composer Dante Tomaselli has been steadily sculpting a body of bizarre work for 15 years—movies that boldly defy mainstream genre preconceptions and are proudly personal. Following such abstract, jet-black features as 1999's *Desecration*, 2002's sensorial meltdown *Horror* and 2006's eerie *Satan's Playground* is the uncompromising *Torture Chamber* (due on DVD January 28 from Vivendi), a grim portrait of Catholic oppression and demonic terror co-starring horror legend Lynn Lowry and *The Sopranos*' Vincent Pastore.

Not for all tastes, the hallucinatory *Torture Chamber* may be Tomaselli's most ambitious and realized nightmare. FANGORIA investigates...

**FANGORIA:** There are several themes at play in *Torture Chamber*: family, religion and even child abuse. In your words, what is *Torture Chamber*?

**DANTE TOMASELLI:** *Torture Chamber* is a portrait of a religious family in deep psychic pain. Most people have emotional, irrational relationships with their families, especially their parents. I had a very damaged relationship with my dad, who passed away when I was 17. *Torture Chamber* is about feeling spiritually trapped in childhood. There's a metaphysical bond between a mother and her two sons; they share a strong belief in an everlasting hell. A demon of blasphemy and murder is conjured...or maybe it's just mental illness.

In many ways, the lead character, 13-

year-old Jimmy [Carmen LoPorto], is like a suicide bomber. He's completely controlled by his religious family, even locked in an animal cage. The film is told in a nonlinear way because I feel life does not move in a straight line. Like most of my films, it's really about peeling back layers of pain and guilt buried in the unconscious mind. I believe there's another world poking through: the spirit world. Like my earlier features *Desecration* and *Horror*, this one is told through a series of dreams, flashbacks and hallucinations.

**FANG:** You seem to gravitate toward image and sensory pleasure first. Would you agree?

**TOMASELLI:** Definitely. I had nonstop nightmares growing up, and I have something called synesthesia—sound-color synesthesia. Also, I've had many natural—not drug-induced—hallucinations. One time, I saw three giant dragonflies hovering over the side of my childhood house like helicopters. I'll never forget it; I really saw them. That involuntary reflex still kicks in occasionally, and holds a

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powerful grip on my adult world. I try to replicate my childhood nightmares—the look and feel. It's kind of like painting. My films are not anti-Catholic or political; they're more about the psychic reverberations of childhood trauma, and, I guess, the fear of organized religion—evil cloaked in religion. I'm interested in replicating the hazy intersection between life and death, out-of-body-experiences, lucid dreams. Trance horror...ambient horror.

**FANG:** Has it been hard over the years to stick to your guns as far as your very stylized aesthetic?

**TOMASELLI:** Well, I've had some producers want to add CGI effects, and that's something I won't agree with. Aside from that, I just go into a tunnel and make the movie. After four features, I love the process more and more. It's almost a lifestyle. As long as I keep my budgets on the low side, I always know there is another film around the corner. It could take a bunch of years, but I'm in it for the long haul. I'm always exploring storyboards, illustrations, music. When I was younger, I used to take magic classes; I wanted to be a magician. But I have no desire to be a performer; I don't like attention. I prefer to work in the shadows, behind the scenes.

**FANG:** You have the woefully undervalued Lynn Lowry in *Torture Chamber*. Can you speak on her talents? How about the rest of your cast?

**TOMASELLI:** I love Lynn Lowry. I was first seduced by her in David Cronenberg's *Shivers*. There was something off-kilter and sensual, singular and apparitional

about her presence. Every time I saw her in a film like *Cat People* or *I Drink Your Blood* or *The Crazies*—same feeling. No matter the size of the part, she stood out. In *Torture Chamber*, she plays an art therapist, and Jimmy, her student, is sending her psychic punches. She's like a wounded angel; it's kind of an ethereal performance. In the scene where she's stretched out on a medieval rack, she was such a trouper.

Vincent Pastore plays a kind of Italian-American Dr. Loomis type. He's chasing the evil, trying to solve the supernatural puzzle. I knew him because he was supposed to play Bobby Rullo's father in *Desecration*, but at the last minute he got a part in a TV show called *The Last Don*. Then he took off with *The Sopranos*. He loves horror films—mainly the older ones, the classics. Christie Sanford, who plays the religious Mrs. Morgan, has starred in everything I've created from the very beginning. On set, with her pure white scleral contact lenses, Christie literally couldn't see, so she played her part com-

pletely blind. I directed her almost telepathically.

**FANG:** How carefully do you approach violence? Do you have a philosophy about when and how to apply it?

**TOMASELLI:** I think a lot of modern horror films are kind of celebrations of violence, and I've never been a part of that. My films are more about the *sensitivity* to violence. To make a scare sequence effective or interesting, I try to keep it unpredictable. I've made mistakes in past films, like the motorized-toy-airplane scene in *Desecration*; that was regrettable and misguided, but I know there have been a few times here and there when I got it right. It's a delicate play of picture and sound. I follow my own nightmares. It's got to frighten me, provoke me.

I could create a splatterpunk film, an all-out zombie film, if it was dark and intimate and all-encompassing. I could go anywhere my imagination takes me. I don't like to be censored. *Torture Chamber* has some gory moments, but it's more about setting a mood, a state of mind.

There's no caging the demonic fury of *Torture Chamber*'s Jimmy (Carmen LoPorto).

**FANG:** The audio design in *Torture Chamber* is dense. How important are sound and score to you?

**TOMASELLI:** I like for the audience to taste color and touch sound. The sound design needs to be shadowy and tactile. More than any other element of filmmaking, I tinker with the soundtrack endlessly. I have a Roland Fantom-X6 synthesizer, Korg sampler and huge sound library that's been growing throughout the years. When I moved, I immediately started taking piano lessons, because even though I've scored all of my films, it was always instinctual; I started to forget notes and music theory. Now I can read music again, and it's been good to get back to that. My piano teacher, Don Olson, ended up engineering my first CD of electronic music, *Scream in the Dark* [out now from Elite Entertainment].

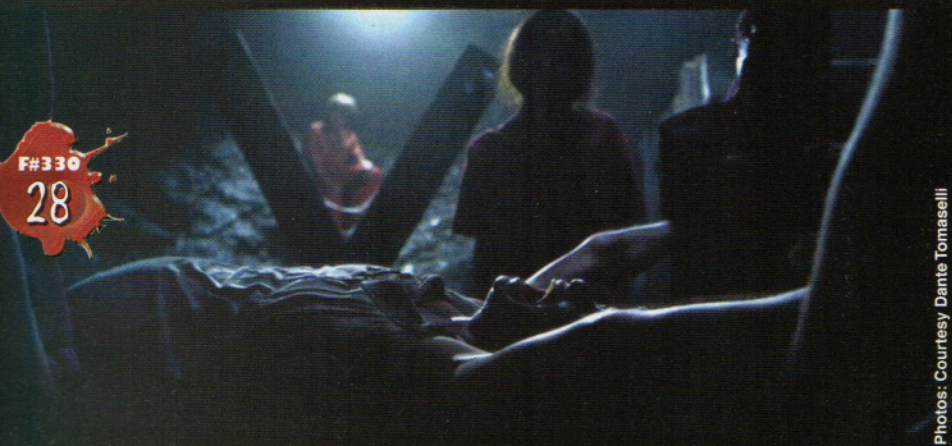
**FANG:** Your cousin is filmmaker and now celebrated production designer Alfred Sole, writer/director of the Catholic horror classic *Alice, Sweet Alice*. You've long had plans to remake that film, co-writing it with FANGORIA's Michael Gingold. Where are you at with that?

**TOMASELLI:** *Alice, Sweet Alice* is in development. Funding is not in place yet. I got an offer to direct another horror film, same budget as *Torture Chamber*, called *The Doll*, set in Salem. I've always felt a connection to the witch trials, with their emphasis on purity, superstition, damnation and hell. I believe it has to do with one of my past lives. *The Doll*, which Mike and I are writing, is a haunted-house chiller set in Salem, centering on a family-owned wax museum. I definitely want to go full-on funhouse. The sounds in my head are demanding it.

I'm composing a preliminary soundtrack for *The Doll* that I'm almost finished with. I know it's a bit unorthodox to release a soundtrack before a film is even shot, but I always compose the bulk of my scores before shooting anyway. The music inspires the script, and vice versa; one flows into the other.

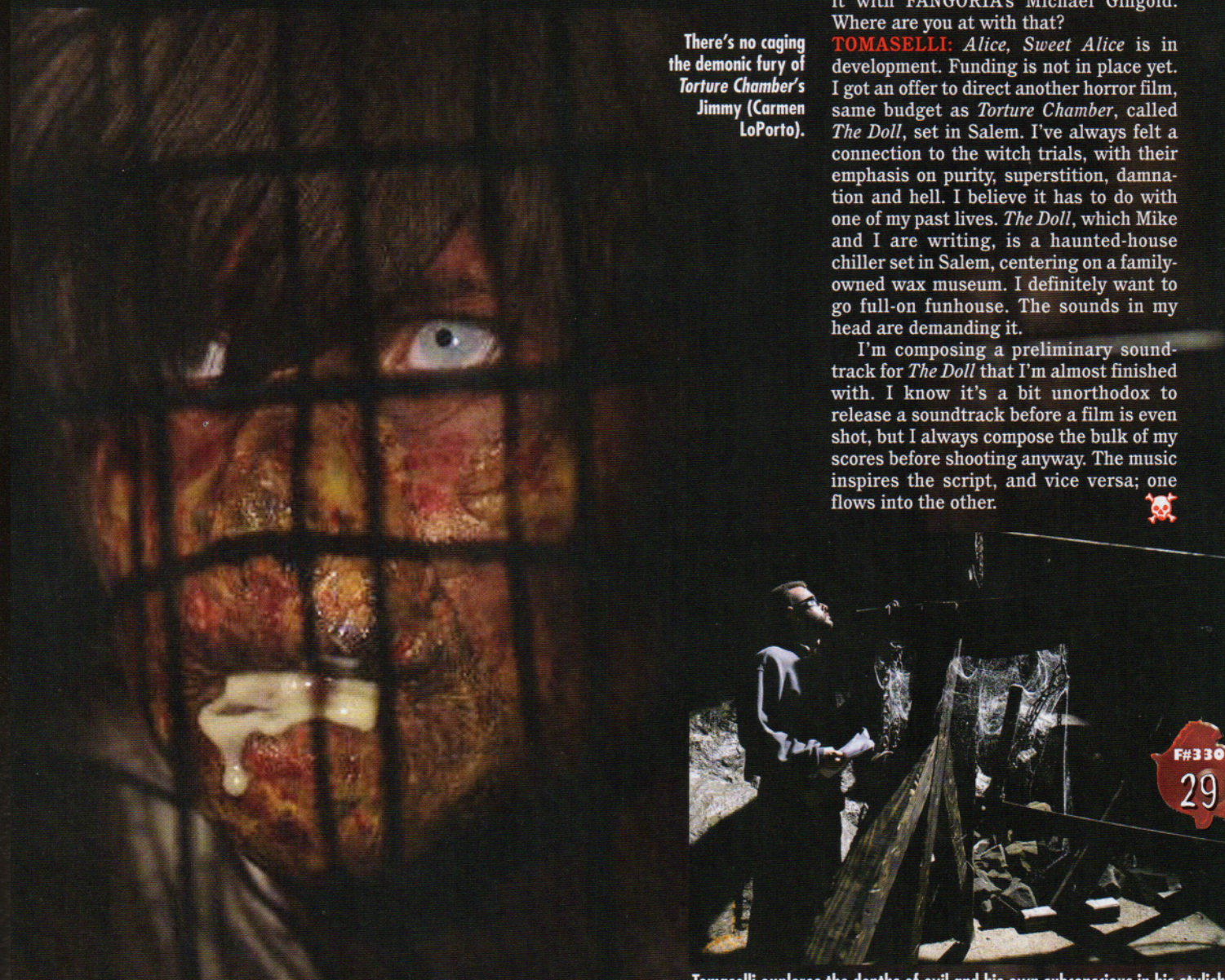


The fires of hell are poised to leap off her canvas and engulf Lisa (Lynn Lowry).



Photos: Courtesy Dante Tomaselli

Far from torture porn, Dante Tomaselli's film makes the violence personal—and painful.



Tomaselli explores the depths of evil and his own subconscious in his stylish features.