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, jek-blaxx features as 1999’s Desecration, 2003’s searing melodrama Horror and 2006’s eerie Saturn’s Playground in the inhumanly Torture Chamber (due on DVD January 28 from Vivendi), a grit portrait of Catholic oppression and demonic terror co-starring horror legend Lynn Lowry and The Supreme Vincent Pastore. Not for all tastes, this 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 TOMASSELI: Torture Chamber is a portrait of a religious family in deep psychic pain. Most people have conditioned, 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 sense of blasphemy and murder is juridified 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 a torturer’s box. I wrote it as a nonlinear way because I feel life does not move in a straight line. Like most of my films, Torture Chamber is more than a film of pain and guilt buried in the unconscious mind. I believe there’s another world pok- ing through the skull: an underground diacritical place. Earlier features Desecration and Horror, this one is told through a series of dreams, flashbacks and nightmares. It’s a journey into the heart of a tortured angel.

FANGORIA: You seem to gravitate toward image and sensory pleasure first. Would you say your work is sensual?

TOMASSELI: Definitely. I had no stop nights watching paintings in the Louvre and I was just so tuned in to everything, I just wanted to put it down on celluloid. I love film as sensory synesthesia. Also, I’ve had many natural experiences that have been so all-encompassing. One time, I saw three giant dragons hovering over the side of my childhood mountain. I had a very strong feeling that I really saw them. That involuntary reflex still kicks in occasionally, and holds a complete, absolute blank. I directed her almost telepathically.

There’s an awning the demonic fury of Torture Chamber’s Jimmy (Carmen LoPorto).

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

TOMASSELI: I think a lot of modern horror films are only kinds of celebrations of violence, and I’ve never been a part of that. My films are more about the sensuality to violence. To make a scare sequence effective or interesting. I try to keep it unpre- dictable. I’ve made mistakes in past films, like the motorized toy-airplane scene in Desecration; that was regrettable and misguided, but I have been able to learn from those experiences. This time 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, 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 cooed. Torture Chamber has some operator’s moments, but it’s more about setting a mood, a state of mind.

“Torture Chamber” is in development. Finding is not in place yet. I got an offer to direct another horror film, same budget as Torture Chamber, called The Doll, set in Thailand. 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. The sounds in my head are demanding it.

I’m composing a preliminary sound track for The Doll that I’m almost finished with. I knew it was 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.

Dante Tomaselli explores the depths of evil and his own subconscious in his style...