

"SATAN'S PLAYGROUND"

Satan's Playground starts to subvert your expectations early on. The film begins with an age-old horror premise in which a group of people find themselves stranded in an isolated location after their car breaks down. Any fan of the genre knows that cars only break down in front of houses occupied by murderous crazies. That happens here too, but what's subversive is the tone writer/director Dante Tomaselli's movie takes. Whereas the opportunity to present multiple bloodlettings would be sufficient reason for most horror flicks to exist, *Satan's Playground* isn't content to be another generic slasher story. Instead, this is an ambitious and surprisingly disturbing tale that's heavier on the thematic ideas than on the gore (which is admirably restrained). In other words, it's not the violence that scares and shocks you; it's the underlying meaning of the characters' actions, particularly at the end. (More on that later.)

Set in New Jersey's eerie Pine Barrens, *Satan's Playground* introduces us to a station wagon full of characters. There is Donna (Felissa Rose), her sister Paula (Ellen Sandweiss), her husband Frank (Salvatore Paul Piro), and two children: the mentally challenged teenager Sean (Danny Lopes) and an infant. When the car gets stuck, the characters wander off one at a time for help, each time failing to return. That's because they all end up at the ramshackle home of Mrs. Leeds (Irma St. Paule), who may have given birth to the legendary Jersey Devil.

What goes on in the home I will not reveal to you. You can be sure, though, that it is a house of horrors. Each of the characters makes his or her way into it, only to discover that there is no way out. While I don't want to ruin any of the story's surprises, I do want to tell you that perhaps the creepiest thing the characters encounter is Judy (Christie Sanford), the grown daughter of Mrs. Leeds. At least, I think she's grown. An adult woman in a white girly dress and pig tails, Judy carries an expression of pure evil that sharply contrasts the childlike nature of her appearance. You know how some people are really creeped out by dolls? Well, Judy exemplifies that in human form. Such a creation runs the risk of coming off silly, but Sanford hits all the right notes. She uses the character's offbeat appearance to leave you feeling unsettled. It's a really effective performance – one that is done solely through body language and facial expressions, as Judy really doesn't speak.

Dante Tomaselli has made three films so far. The first, 1999's *Desecration* cost \$150,000. *Horror*, released in 2002, cost \$250,000. *Satan's Playground* represents the director's biggest budget at \$500,000. Normally, I don't mention budgets in a review. I make an exception this time because Tomaselli is a filmmaker with ideas, and each time his budget increases, you can feel his imagination being liberated. As one who uses sets, lighting, and camera angles to create a sense of fear and dread, he gets the most out of his budgets. *Satan's Playground* benefits enormously from the production values that a horror film needs. The old house is, indeed, creepy. The photography conveys an eerie feeling, particularly in the scenes where the camera looms over the spooky forest. These things add to the ideas Tomaselli injects into his scripts, once again marking him as a genuine original in the realm of horror filmmakers. From the time I first reviewed *Desecration*, I said that I couldn't wait to see where he went with his future films. So far, I haven't been disappointed.

Unfortunately, the current trend in horror movies is "torture chic" – pictures that take a pornographic approach to horror by trying to get the audience off on perverse acts of violence. This is not one of those films (thank goodness). There is one extremely gory sequence here, but otherwise the blood and gore are used only as needed. Tomaselli is much more interested in examining, as he has put it to me, the reverberations of evil. What I'm getting at is that movies like *Hostel* and *Saw* seem to celebrate evil; Tomaselli's do not. They recognize that evil exists in the world and they look at how that evil manifests itself. You're never encouraged to root for the killers. Consequently, there's a moral center here because you're appalled by the murderous actions of the bad guys. By clearly branding them as evil – and by never trying to make them "cool" or heroic – the movie is, to me at least, far more effective and satisfying than 99% of the horror films released these days.

Satan's Playground saves its biggest shock for last. In fact, you could almost call it subliminal. Shortly after the end credits started to roll, I realized that something in the plot had not been resolved. This lack of resolution sent a chill up my spine, literally. Tomaselli breaks one of the cardinal rules of horror filmmaking to chilling effect. It's a gutsy move – one that gives *Satan's Playground* the kind of un-safe vibe that gave *Last House on the Left* or *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* such lasting impact. You know you're in the hands of a filmmaker who isn't afraid to take you to the darkest places imaginable.

So unnerved was I that I had to e-mail Tomaselli, partially to let him know how effective it was and partially to get an explanation. While I'm going to preserve the surprise, I will share with you what he said: "I left the ending [spoiler deleted] purposely ambiguous, but hopefully you get the impression of innocence stolen, obliterated. All that's left is satanic evil." Job well done, Dante.

As I said, Tomaselli has clearly grown over the course of three films. I hope he continues to do this. So few really interesting horror movies are made these days that we need to foster those filmmakers who are actually trying to find the artistry within the genre. *Satan's Playground* shows its maker is on the right trajectory, looking for new things to say and new ways to rattle us to the core.

Satan's Playground is available on DVD from Anchor Bay Entertainment. Special features include a behind-the-scenes featurette, a poster/still gallery, and audio commentary from Tomaselli.

To learn more about this film, check out [Satan's Playground Official Site](#)

