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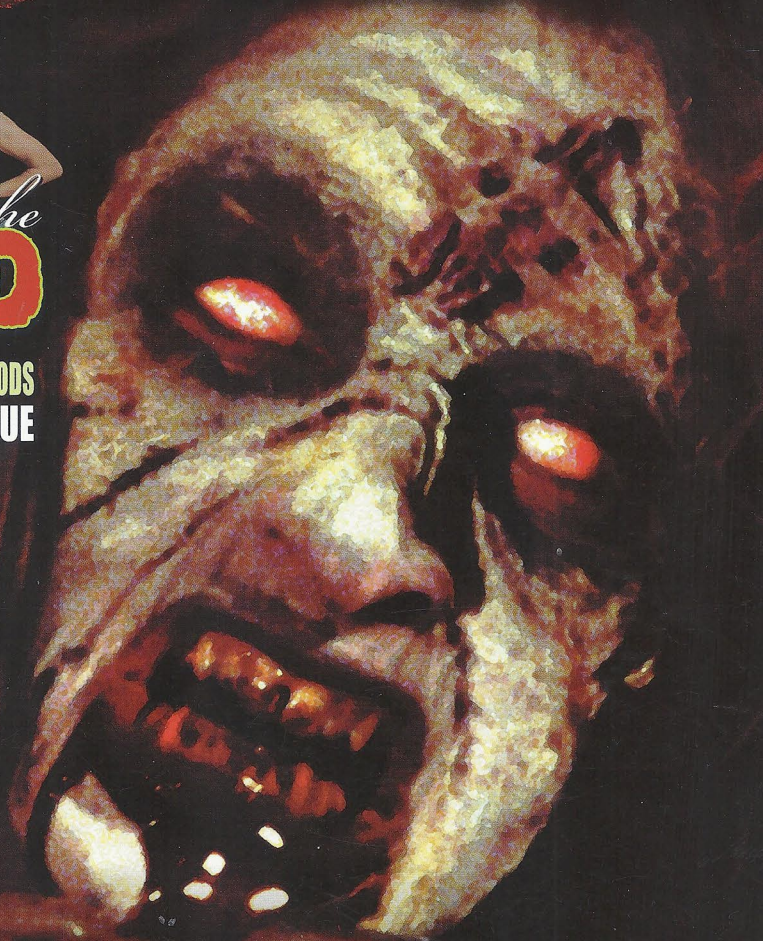
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What happens when an independent American filmmaker brings European flair to his macabre visions? A tale of hell and limbo, evil and vice, nightmare and paranoid delusion....

# The Eponymous Horror of Dante Tomaselli

by Gary Butler

The term "nightmare logic" has an unmistakable ring to it. Why? Because it's something that anyone and everyone who has ever suffered through a bad dream can relate to. Nightmare logic is disorienting, disturbing, absurd, and yet strangely, cruelly sensible. Occasionally, a filmmaker of unusual vision and technique is able to replicate this effect, and the results can be just as effective. Perhaps that is why, when considering the beautifully nightmarish visions of independent filmmaker Dante Tomaselli, the question is not "What is the matter?" but rather "What is the subject matter?" The answer is the very title of Tomaselli's second movie, called *Horror*.

"My goal was to make a film that spoke in dream language, purposely ambiguous," says Tomaselli, adding, "a movie about being lost in a nightmare world of all-encompassing doom ought to be called *Horror*."

Certainly, the writer/director's bleak and fatalistic film invokes primal, conceptual horror to great success. Hell and limbo are here, evil and vice, nightmare and paranoid delusion. Beyond the broad-strokes, though, *Horror* is difficult to describe. Tomaselli is an American filmmaker (indeed, he's the cousin of Alfred Sole, director of the New York giallo classic *Alice, Sweet Alice*). But Tomaselli's approach to film is every bit as European as his name.

Reminiscent of the melodramatic, vibrant expressionism of Dario Argento and Lucio Fulci, *Horror* is a deeply artistic but purposely disjointed experience, ultimately less a story than a setting. There is a minimalist plot (there are two of them, actually) and there are characters with specific roles, but the reality of the situation is that reality itself holds no sway. Time has no meaning; space is displaced. The result is continuity intentionally undermined, to questionable – albeit intriguing – effect.

"*Horror* was originally called *Death's Door*," Tomaselli says, adding that the name was changed to avoid confusion with a competing straight-to-video release. "I liked that title because it conjured dislocation imagery, the hazy intersection between life and death."

What little is certain includes the following: Luck (Danny Lopes) is the leader of a gang of youths escaped from a drug rehab centre. The gang seeks refuge on the farm of a sinister preacher, Salo, who had befriended the youths and offered them spiritual guidance during their incarceration. Salo is a mentalist, capable of forcing involuntary actions from people. (And if you like your evil unconventional, not only does The Amazing Kreskin play the part, but his mentalism sequences featuring Tomaselli's cast are, apparently, legitimate.)

Arriving at Salo's isolated homestead, Luck stumbles across an adult couple torturing a teenage girl. Acting more out of instinct than chivalry, Luck murders the couple, only to discover that Salo is actually long-deceased. The girl, Grace, is Salo's granddaughter and her abusers are Salo's son and his wife – in other words, Grace's parents.

"I'm interested in that kind of hypocrisy, the cycle of abuse passed on from generation to generation," Tomaselli says. "These are supposed to be religious

"Horror is a maze with many different ways out."

–Dante Tomaselli

people, religious leaders. Grace is a tragic character, a sacrificial lamb, disintegrating throughout the film."

The double homicide lets loose a chaotic, evil force that had been contained within Grace's parents. From this point – quite early in the proceedings, by the way – everything goes straight to hell both within and outside the Salo homestead, which becomes both a sanctuary and a prison for the disparate group of protagonists. As reality comes unglued, Tomaselli deploys an atmospheric amalgam of abstracted horror archetypes, including a Satanic beast, zombies, and a Dorian Gray-style painting that is also the gateway to a chamber of horrors. Although open to interpretation, *Horror* is clearly fuelled by an internal logic; the movie comes full-circle with an ending that places Luck back in the drug rehab centre, on the verge of his breakout, doomed to repeat the experience.

"This is a film where guilt/Luck and innocence/Grace converge," he says, "though they both suffer terrible fates. *Horror* has a telepathic love story at its core. Luck kills Grace's parents. Grace feels guilty but relieved. Who is he? Where did he come from? That's luck: elusive and unpredictable. Of course, in the end, he doesn't bring her luck. And she doesn't grant him grace."

Like the circular nature of the plot, Tomaselli himself is fond of returning to previous stories and characters. In fact, he wrote Luck as an older version of the main character in his first film, 1999's indie-cult favourite, *Desecration* (see RM#20).

"To me, Luck is Bobby from *Desecration*, and the last we saw of him, he was on a journey through Hell," Tomaselli says.

Plagued by the death of his mother, Bobby is left trapped in a purgatory made equally of his own devices and those of his mother's vengeful, tortured soul.

"Bobby would very naturally become someone like Luck," adds Tomaselli. "What I wanted to show with Bobby and Luck, through a series of dreams and hallucinations, is the evolution of madness and how much of it is connected to childhood fears."

Madness, of course, is beyond reason – a possible defense for the ultimately nonsensical plots in both of Tomaselli's films, though as answers run, one that fails to satisfy.

"I don't feel there are any concrete answers – I don't want there to be," protests the director. "*Horror* is a maze with many different ways out. The word 'horror' is dark and all-encompassing yet vague, and that describes these films."

Next year, Tomaselli will film *Apparition*, the third installment in the conceptual trilogy that started with *Desecration* and *Horror*. Just as its predecessors examined the failure of religion as well as the supernatural evil that fills the void left by faith exposed as sham, *Apparition* will be "a gory, *Exorcist*-like shocker about a religious family torn apart by guilt." But first, this August, Tomaselli will shoot his third, "more straightforward" movie, *Satan's Playground*, which he is confident will earn a 2003 theatrical release.

"It's a lost-in-the-woods horror film involving a vacationing family shattered by unexpected violence, and it explores the legend of the New Jersey Devil," says the director. "I want to give it a raw, *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and *The Hills Have Eyes* kind of vibe, very minimalist. I only want to use two locations: a creepy old house and the woods. *Desecration* and *Horror* were about me, made for me. *Satan's Playground* is for all the horror fans waiting for a truly scary horror movie. I promise to make this one very grim, intense and credible. It'll be a real obstacle course through Hell." ☼



Dark Dreams: Three views of *Horror* and director Tomaselli (bottom) on set.