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Horror A-

Elite Entertainment / LD Media Corp.

Year Released: 2003 MPAA Rating: Not Rated Director: Dante Tomaselli Writer: Dante Tomaselli

Cast: Lizzy Mahon, Danny Lopes, Vincent Lamberti, Christie Sanford, Jessica

Pagan, Raine Brown, Kevin Kenney, Kreskin.

Review by Michael Scrutchin

Stuart Gordon, director of Re-Animator and Castle Freak, once said in an interview with Creative Screenwriting that horror isn't about jumping out of your seat. "Horror is the sense of dread that you get," he said. "The way you know something terrible is going to happen and you can't bear it." It's a shame that many filmmakers don't seem to understand or agree with this sentiment, perhaps under the delusion that throwing around copious amounts of blood and severed body parts coupled with a few cheap shocks equals true horror. Now, there's nothing inherently wrong with gore and easy scares, but horror is more than that.

Dante Tomaselli understands this. What makes *Desecration* (his first film) and *Horror* (his sophomore release now on special-edition DVD from Elite Entertainment) so frightening is the sense of dread that oozes from the surreal, nightmarish atmosphere. With *Horror*, Tomaselli once again delves into themes of Catholic repression, illicit drug use, and twisted family dynamics, serving up a trancelike tapestry of images and sounds that's completely mesmerizing. I don't know what it all means (Tomaselli is big on ambiguity), but I was enthralled every step of the way. The plot involves five teens who escape from a drug rehab center and head to the home of a reverend (Vincent Lamberti) who had promised them salvation — and lots of drugs, too, as he gave them a bag full of mushrooms and other goodies to tide them over. Meanwhile, the reverend and his wife (Christie Sanford) have been enslaving their teenage daughter, Grace (Lizzy Mahon), by keeping her sedated and brainwashed. Also figuring into the plot is Grace's grandfather, Reverend Salo (The Amazing Kreskin, wonderful here), a seemingly kind-hearted faith healer who may have a few skeletons in his closet.

The plot, of course, is merely the thread upon which Tomaselli hangs his deliciously chilling imagery and nightmarish set pieces. From the ominous black goat and the demented floating jack-o-lanterns to the massive horde of bloodthirsty zombies that arrives near the end, Horror takes familiar horror-movie images, throws them into a hallucinatory kaleidoscope, and makes them new again. The most gut-wrenchingly frightening scenes, however, are the ones that play it lower key, as when Grace is speaking with her grandfather in a dark bedroom. He sits on the edge of the bed with his back to her, and the camera lingers on his profile as he sits entirely still. I knew something wasn't right in that scene, and it scared the hell out of me as I waited for that eminent terrible-something to happen. That unsettling fear stayed with me throughout the rest of the film, and Horror has a wicked sense of fun that compliments the spine-tingling atmosphere quite nicely.

As effective as it is, though, Horror isn't without flaws. Like Desecration, it has several poor performances (mainly from the secondary disposable teens, not the key players), but they don't hurt the film too much. In fact, I think the weak performances and some forced, hokey dialogue actually enhance the movie's surreal, dreamlike ambience, much like bad acting and laughable dialogue can do for some of the films by Dario Argento or Lucio Fulci. Instead, what could have pushed Horror over into bona fide masterpiece territory is a deeper emotional core and stronger character development. The only character who gained my sympathies was Grace, exceptionally well played by Lizzy Mahon, whose torment rings painfully true, while the rehab escapees are just cardboard cutouts.

That said, Horror still blows away most American horror films being released these days (whether on the big-budget Hollywood scale or on the micro-budget indie level), and it's much closer to the spirit and tone of many of the truly scary classics of the 1970s than fleetingly amusing sick jokes like Rob Zombie's House of 1000 Corpses. With Tim Naylor's beautiful, haunting, and evocative cinematography and Tomaselli's immersive sound design, it's easy to get lost in Horror. Tomaselli even gives us some appropriately shocking gore and some effective "gotcha" scares. But unlike so many of his peers, Tomaselli knows that's not what horror is all about and he stirs up a feverish, pervasive sense of dread that works so well it's scary.

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