

## THE HOLE (2001) ㄹㄹㄹ

D: Nick Hamm. Thora Birch, Desmond Harrington, Keira Knightley, Embeth Davidtz, Daniel Brocklebank, Lawrence Fox, Steven Waddington. 102 mins. DVD (Dimension Home Video) 10/03

The *Hole* is an entertaining and well-executed (literally) little thriller that keeps you guessing until the last scene. What appears to start out as a teen angst movie about an outsider trying to fit in at a British public school soon becomes a "he said"/"she said" whodunit. Liz (Birch), a Goth-type schoolgirl, is found wandering on campus in a daze. She's dirty, her clothes are torn, and she's unable to speak. We learn that she and three other teens have been missing for 18 days. To find out what happened, a psychiatrist (Davidtz) must get Liz to remember the traumatic events that created a memory block. As soon as you think you've figured out what this movie is about, it does a complete turnaround and introduces the unexpected. So, what I initially thought was a *Heathers* rip-off, with a clichéd crowd of spoiled rich kids versus the unpopular girl, changes into something far cleverer. As for the cast of characters, we have Mike (Harrington), the son of a rock star, Geoff (Fox), a Brit footballer jock, and supermodel blonde bitch Frankie (Knightley). After Liz becomes the victim of a joke that leaves her feeling humiliated, friend Martyn (Brocklebank), whom the rich kids turn to for contraband, devises a plot to get back at the clique. The titular hole is an abandoned underground shelter that plays a pivotal role in Martyn's well-conceived plan of revenge. What begins as the ultimate private-party hangout transforms into a deathtrap after Martyn locks up Liz and the rich kids, trapping them underground. I won't go into details, but trust me, director Hamm knows how to push all the right buttons. There are enough twists, turns, and false leads to keep you in suspense until all is revealed. To sum it up in awful pun terms, I really dug *The Hole*.

—Dwight Kemper

## HORROR (2002) ㄹㄹㄹ

D: Dante Tomaselli. Danny Lopes, Vincent Lambert, Lizzy Mahon, The Amazing Kreskin, Christi Sanford. 73 mins. DVD (Elite Entertainment) 5/03

Writer/director Tomaselli's sophomore film seems straightforward at first glance: after hearing the apocalyptic preaching of Reverend Salo Jr. (Lamberti), a group of teenagers escapes from drug rehab to join him at his isolated commune, where they make some horrific discoveries about the Rev, his captive daughter, and his deceased father. Things quickly become more bizarre as time loops back on itself and drug trips and bad dreams blur with reality. But focusing on a linear plot is the wrong way to approach *Horror*. Like Adrian Lyne's *Jacob's Ladder* and much of

David Lynch's oeuvre, the film works through associative and dream logic. Location is of paramount importance: unexplainable, horrifying events happen in front of a fireplace, which is later revealed to have been the scene of a murder. A key is lost under a bed and seems to disappear, but several scenes later an important family album emerges from the same place. This isn't to say that *Horror* doesn't also pack a more visceral punch; the style is very reminiscent of Argento and Bava, and some genuine chills are scattered throughout. Real-life hypnotist The Amazing Kreskin, playing Reverend Salo Sr., gives an especially creepy performance here. *Elite's* DVD features an anamorphic widescreen transfer that makes good use of Tomaselli's dark color palette. The Dolby 5.1 soundtrack is front-heavy, though when the surround channels do show up, they're very effective. Extras include some behind-the-scenes footage, trailers, and clips from Tomaselli's first film, *Desecration*, but the real highlight is a commentary track by the director which should answer some of the questions that are sure to remain after the first viewing. Keep an eye out for *Sleepaway Camp* star Felissa Rose in a cameo.

—Brandon Grafius

## HUNTING HUMANS (2002) ㄹㄹㄹ

D: Kevin Kangas. Rick Ganz, Bubby Lewis, Lisa Michele, James Fellows. 90 mins. DVD (MTI/Redrum Entertainment) 7/03

*Hunting Humans* is a neat little independent thriller with a unique twist. Serial killer Eric Blue (Ganz) adheres to a definite set of rules when he stalks his prey and shares those rules and tricks of the trade with you, the viewing public. Eric's only problem is he's not the only one hunting humans and soon finds himself in a game of one-upmanship when an unidentified serial killer who calls himself "Dark" starts hunting *him*. Evan Evans' Bernard Herrmann-style music score adds to the atmosphere director Kangas establishes within the film's first few frames. The tension builds to a deft battle-of-the-killers climax as Blue turns the tables on Dark, Dark turns the tables back on Blue, and so on, until only one serial killer is left standing. (One caveat: Avoid the preview trailer, which gives away Dark's identity!) The filmmaker even threw me a couple of curves: At one point I thought this was going to degenerate into some kind of hokey monster movie but that was just a blood-red herring. This is one indie thriller that I hope may someday be reshot with a larger budget and better camera equipment. (Don't get me wrong. The film is very well lit and the camera angles are excellent, but the low budget for film stock shows; I'm assuming this was either Super 8mm with film-to-video transfer or digital video.) There were times while watching this film I was reminded of a Brian De Palma or even, dare I say it, a Hitchcock movie (okay, maybe not quite a Hitchcock, but pretty damn close). If you're



Ray Liotta takes a shot in the dark while John Cusack looks on in James Mangold's *Identity*.

hunting for a good serial-killer thriller, then stalk your video store and bag yourself a copy of *Hunting Humans*.

—Dwight Kemper

## IDENTITY (2001) ㄹㄹ1/2

D: James Mangold. John Cusack, Ray Liotta, Amanda Peet, Jake Busey, Rebecca De Mornay, John Hawkes. 90 mins. DVD (Columbia/TriStar) 9/03

On a dark and stormy night, a judicial panel has been convened to reconsider the fate of a convicted serial killer. The jurors await his arrival, which has been delayed because of the storm. Meanwhile, a Rube Goldberg series of connected traffic accidents and washed-out roads leads to the gathering of 10 strangers at a middle-of-nowhere motel. Among the group are ex-cop Cusack, brutal detective Liotta, and snarling prisoner Busey. Barely have the disparate characters settled into the motel when someone starts picking them off one by one. As well, they begin to discover disquieting coincidences that build links among them all, strangers though they are. The tensions and mysteries intensify...and then we get the twist. As twists go, it isn't much of one, telegraphed as it is not only by the opening credits but even by the film's poster. The twist is also rather disappointing, changing a film that was promising to take us into new spooky territory into the kind of story we've seen plenty of times before. On the other hand, this twist comes not at the end of the picture but at the beginning of the third act, and its consequences do play out suspensefully, even if the originality has largely evaporated. The conclusion is still a letdown, all the more so in that the flick is top-notch in most other respects. The motel and the perpetual night and storm may be clichéd horror-movie settings, but *Identity* illustrates that they became clichés because they work. Cusack is an actor who somehow makes every line he speaks sound intelligent, and he turns in another strong perf. Liotta is in full-on aggression mode, dueling with Busey to see who can creep us out the most. In short, all the elements are here; *Identity* could really have been something, were it not for that damn twist.

—David Annandale