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DESECRATING THE HORROR

An Interview With

DANTE TOMASELLI

By Mark Engle

Dante Tomaselli broke into the horror-independent scene with **DESECRATION**. Three years later, this first film is now available from IMAGE ENTERTAINMENT on DVD and the director is now about to unleash **HORROR** onto the world and its genre fans. Will it keep Dante Tomaselli on the map? We definitely think so. We caught up with this East Coast director as he sets forth to start hard at work on his third full-length feature.

CULTCUTS: When did you first get into filmmaking and what significantly pushed you over the edge from *wanting* to make movies to *actually* doing it?

DANTE TOMASELLI: I always knew that I wanted to make films, specifically horror films, since I was, like three. I know this because in 1973 I was three and that was the year **DON'T LOOK NOW** came out. The evil, knife-wielding dwarf paralyzed me with fear. I was deeply affected by the movie and the TV commercials. And of course, that was the year of **THE EXORCIST**. I always loved drawing and painting. And lighting -- the idea of light, fascinated me. I'd see multicolored streaks in the atmosphere...little pinpoints of light, like atoms. Those visions would come out at night when I was lying in bed. I had very intense nightmares, too. I guess I kept a lot inside and it had to come out somehow. At that age, I would paint graveyards and haunted houses with ghosts coming out of windows...all kinds of monsters. I loved music and my family had this magical electronic organ. I was constantly playing it, hitting the low and high tones, to create an eerie sound. I was three years old. It was just an urge, an instinct that was always there, this profound love of the macabre. I completely immersed myself in horror movie imagery and sounds. I knew when I grew up I wanted to be a horror filmmaker or a parapsychologist. You know, a ghost hunter. In first grade, and all throughout grammar school, my notebook was filled with hor-

ror movies done in the same exact font as they're supposed to. I would draw movies like **THE OMEN** - you know, in that special way with the three 6's, **HALLOWEEN**, **THE FOG**, **PHANTASM**, **THE BLOOD**, **CARRIE**, **THE SHINING**...there are so many others. The ad campaign for **INVASION OF THE BODY SNATCHERS** was excellent. The Seed is planted...Terror Grows. I'll never forget the TV commercials for **SUSPIRIA**, with the skull and whispery voice. I just love Poster-Art: **ROSEMARY'S BABY**, **THE LEGACY**, **THE SENTINEL**, **PROPHECY** ('79), **COMES THE BLIND FURY**, **FRIDAY THE 13TH**, **SCANNERS**, and **ALIEN**. "In space no one can hear you scream." And remember "One, two, Freddy's coming for you, three, four, better lock your door..." Horror commercials used to be so effective. As I know you know, the 70's and 80's was a great time to grow up in terms of quality and quantity. Going to scary movies and loving them was a lifestyle. There was a brand new treat coming out every single week. I bought the posters and the soundtracks and read Fangoria Magazine. I read Stephen King and John Saul and watched certain horror films over and over and over. I turned my bedroom into a funhouse. I guess there was no end to my obsession. I fantasized a lot.

CC: You started out making short films in New York such as **MAMA'S BOY**. How did you go about getting it done, what other shorts have you made and what type of films are they?

DT: Well, my first shorts were more like video art. I did a very strange hallucinatory seven-minute video called **EMOTIONAL VIOLENCE** when I was seventeen or eighteen. My early pieces were montages. Of course, they were totally nonlinear. I didn't work with actual film 'til I was about twenty. Video is a great medium to practice with but film is the real deal. Yeah, I started making the first versions of **DESECRATION** in my college classes. Back then it was called **MAMA'S BOY**. I knew I was going to expand it eventually. I'm sure some people in my classes thought I was out of my mind, those early ver-

sions of **MAMA'S BOY** were really out-there. After three years of living on campus at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, I transferred to the New York School of Visual Arts. I also started taking film courses at The New School. When I was twenty-three, I made a more ambitious version of **MAMA'S BOY**. I placed an ad on the Village Voice Bulletin Board looking for a film crew to work on a "hard-core horror film." I advertised myself as a director, even though at that time I was not experienced working with a real crew. I had no experience, just ambition. I got so many responses from that ad it was unbelievable. Soon I had a talented team of artists around me waiting to work on this completely out-there little film about a demon mother taunting her caged son and feeding him hallucinogens through a baby bottle. I was living on 91st and Broadway at the time and had all sorts of annoying telemarketing jobs to pay for film stock. Finally, after many years of **MAMA'S BOY** 16mm shorts, I raised the \$14,000 needed to make a twenty-three minute version. I shot it myself and called it **DESECRATION**. That was the one that finally started getting recognized. It ended up having 16mm bits and pieces from all my **MAMA'S BOY** shorts. So that early stuff I did paid off somehow. As the new **DESECRATION** short started getting into festivals, I met my investor at Angelika Film Center's Independent Feature Film Market in NYC. Then, in the winter of 1997, when I was twenty-eight, I made the feature length for \$150,000. It was completed and copyrighted in 1999 and distributed on DVD and VHS by Image Entertainment in March 2000.

CC: We've been told that you love horror as a genre. What influenced you into that direction and are there any other genres you would like to tackle in your career?

DT: I'm here for horror. Look, I even called my second film **HORROR**. I love it. You'll see me working exclusively in this genre forever.

CC: You've probably been asked many times about the religious subtexts in your films. Is there a connection between your films and your cousin Alfred Sole's **ALICE**, **SWEET ALICE** aka **COMMUNION**?

DT: Well, I'm probably more influenced by that movie than any other, so that's bound to reflect in my work. I grew up on **ALICE**, **SWEET ALICE**. My cousin's film just plays through my psyche all the time. What I find so fascinating about **ALICE**, **SWEET ALICE**, is that, even after all these years, the film is still so enigmatic. I can never really get a hold on it, no matter how many times I watch it. It's elusive. I think that's the connection. I instinctually bring that to my films -- that ambiguity. It must be something in the family blood.

CC: How important is the Catholic and religious symbolism in your films? How deep does it go and will it continue to be a subtext in upcoming films? In other words, why do you combine horror with Catholicism and is it more of an attack, obsession or desire for a religious truth?

DT: Sometimes I'm just a vessel and these ideas come through me. I don't know. I don't mean to trash Catholicism or religion. It's the clashing between good and evil, I'm interested in that. Something in my past, in

my childhood, hurt me. I'm still stuck there when I make these films. My movies are definitely not political. They could be read that way, sure, that's fine, but they are personal. I'm trying to work out my own issues and I definitely have a lot of mixed feelings about organized religion. It becomes a metaphor for paranoia. By mixing religion and the supernatural, my movies seem to have more questions than answers. You *should* get the feeling of being lost. At the core, there's a trauma and a pain that won't go away and can't be explained easily.

CC: **DESECRATION** started out as a short film before you made it into a full-length feature. Where and when does the short feature end and the full-length begin thematically?

DT: I can't even look at the short anymore. Really. I just feel so over it now. The twenty-three minute short was practice for me. The feature is a whole different animal. I really don't even compare the two.

CC: Any difficulties going from short features to full length?

DT: Yes. No one really takes you seriously until you've directed a feature -- that's for sure. You have no credibility if you've only directed a short -- doesn't even matter if it's award winning. The proof is in the feature, how that comes out. The hardest part, of course, is coming up with the money.

CC: You wrote, directed and produced (with Tony Rullis and Jack Swain) **DESECRATION**. Was there a reason why you didn't go through any particular production outfit? How did you fund **DESECRATION** into full-length feature?

DT: For my first film, I knew that the only way it was going to happen was through private financing. There's no way any studio or production company would ever fund **DESECRATION**. And I only want total creative control; otherwise I wouldn't do this at all. I'm not a technician. I'm a lousy crewmember. I'm a visualist. My talent is in pulling all the elements together, like a composer.

CC: Where on earth did you find Irma St. Paule (as Grandma Matilda) and how did you convince her to play in a horror film?

DT: She sent me her headshot and resume in the mail when I was casting for **DESECRATION**. I was actually going to have Mildred Clinton, the old housekeeper from **ALICE**, **SWEET ALICE**, play the lead. I contacted her and we met in NYC. She auditioned but we didn't hit it off. Irma was a godsend. She was the gypsy who was run over by a car in Stephen King's **THINNER**. That's how I recognized her. Irma is a wonderful actress who, occasionally, has temper tantrums but that's okay because she's like ninety years old and has every right. Some of the things she had to go through in **DESECRATION**, like walking up long flights of steps, continuously coughing, braving the winter cold, getting attacked by balloons, warranted some tantrums. It was a very physical role for someone her age. She was a real trooper. Irma may actually return in my third film. She just contacted me and wants to be in it.



CC: Both Danny Lopes and Vincent Lambert appear in both your full-length films. Are they mainstays in your films, part of the Dante Tomaselli ensemble?

DT: And you forgot Christie Sanford. She's been in both of my films, too. I guess it really depends on the project. Though loyalty has something to do with it. If an actor fits the role and they're passionate about it -- they're in. I need synergy. I do want my films to be interchangeable. You're right, I like working with the same faces and morphing them. One swirling universe ... and these characters or symbols are like shape shifters, constantly coming back in different forms.

CC: How well, overall, was **DESECRATION** received?

DT: In the horror community? Pretty well. Of course, there were some critics who savaged it. Said it made no sense, blah blah. But the positive reviews definitely outweighed the bad ones. I have to say, in the horror world, there's been a buzz about **DESECRATION** since my short film came out and I owe that to Chas Balun, who reviewed the twenty-three minute short for Deep Red Magazine back in '97. But the mainstream still hasn't caught on. And they may never. I'd be very happy just making these low budget horror films for a cult audience forever.

CC: You've managed to overcome budget restraints for your films and make them look bigger and better than what they cost. **DESECRATION** has moments of pure imagery that reflect this through the use of lenses and lighting. Is this an integral way of getting around budget constraints or is it the final vision you were looking for?

DT: Thanks. A little of both but yes -- it was the final vision I was going for. **DESECRATION** was so etched in my psyche. I mean, for about seven years I was making the practice shorts over and over. So when it came time to shoot the full-length feature, there was never an awkward debate. The images were as clear as slides projected in my mind. All the cinematographers I've ever worked with have said that they've done the best work of their lives on my projects. I tend to jam-pack the frame with a lot of detail. I want each shot to look like a painting.

CC: Have to ask, so I hope it isn't a sore subject. The toy airplane scene is one of the biggest complaints we hear about **DESECRATION**. How intentionally over-the-top were you shooting for and would you shoot it differently today? It seems out of place and doesn't look very realistic compared to many of the other acts of violence or effects in the film.

DT: Ah yes, the toy airplane sequence. Well, I definitely misjudged there. When I edited that, I purposely made it fragmented, artificial. I wanted the audience to think that's fakeeeee! He is dreaming or hallucinating. I wanted to capture the unreality of the situation. I didn't have to edit it that way but I chose to. In retrospect, I should have cut out earlier and the whole thing could have been avoided. But I followed my instincts and my instincts were wrong. Though something was nagging me to change it. In fact, I definitely should have changed it because when I made my final cut of the film, something deep inside me was saying, you're making a big big mistake, no one will get it. And of course, no one got it. It was just considered sloppy editing. That's one of the things about **DESECRATION** that haunts me. But I've learned to live with it.

CC: Overall, **DESECRATION** has put you on the map as a serious horror filmmaker. Is there anything that you wish you had done differently with the film?

DT: The toy airplane sequence for sure. And I would have toned down Grandma Matilda's cough. That was a bit too much. Um, there are definitely other things... but those two issues, mainly.

CC: Three years between **DESECRATION** and **HORROR**, were there any scripts you tried to get off the ground between the two films

that ended up on the back burner or was the whole period dedicated to **HORROR** as your next effort?

DT: I was planning **HORROR** all along.

CC: **HORROR** is more atmospheric based than character driven compared to **DESECRATION**. Did you consciously go out of your way to make atmosphere as if it was a character of its own?

DT: Yes, absolutely. For **HORROR**, I wanted to up the ante on hallucinogenic scenarios. I still wasn't done exploring the world I created with **DESECRATION**. **HORROR** is almost like an unofficial sequel to **DESECRATION**. I'd say, the two films are inseparable, like twins or close relatives. They are both loops. Where **DESECRATION** and **HORROR** end is where **DESECRATION** and **HORROR** begin. Bobby's very first line in **DESECRATION** is, "I - I didn't mean it." Luck's very last line in **HORROR** is, "I - I didn't mean it." Both films are guilt trips where the characters experience a kind of emotional suicide...an eternal damnation.

CC: Most of the story in **HORROR** takes time and dimensions

out of context. Was this difficult to write and how did the actors take to it?

DT: The entire movie is a time/space dislocation. I wanted to illustrate the hazy intersection between life and death. In fact, **HORROR** was originally called **DEATH'S DOOR**. I'm sure it was difficult for some of the actors. But most of them were excited to work on the project because they had seen **DESECRATION**. And I think my direction was pretty straightforward. We had our imagination sessions before hand; they were all clear on what to do. I think they all had different versions of what the script was about. And I encouraged that. They knew it was a bizarre movie. It was probably most difficult for the script supervisor who had to keep track of the crazy continuity while we were shooting.

CC: What was it like working with the well-known spiritualist and psychic Kreskin?

DT: A lot of fun. Kreskin plays an evil preacher with hypnotic powers. He did an excellent job in the film. Kreskin actually came out of the blue and approached me to be in **HORROR**. I got a letter from his agent shortly before we were about to begin shooting. We met and I gave him the part. Kreskin's scenes feel so real *because they are*. In a few cases, he actually hypnotized actors on set while we were filming. He did. They fell to the ground at his command. It was like watching some display of mass hypnosis. This sort of thing fit in perfectly with the themes running through the film. In **HORROR**, people feel powerless and dominated by a force they have no control over.

CC: **HORROR** contains a lot of elements including hallucinatory fragments, demons, zombies, religious zealots, torture and one hell of a freaky goat. Did you go into it with all of this or did some of it take shape during the shoot?

DT: Yes, it was all in the script from the beginning, the satanic goat...everything.

CC: I have to corner you here. Both of your full-length features come across as very mature pieces of work in set up and execution, yet both **DESECRATION** (the airplane scene) and **HORROR** contain moments of outrageous jaw-dropping scenes that sort of seem out of place. In **HORROR**, I'm talking about the floating demonic jack-o-lanterns that seem like they came out of a Goosebumps story. Is there a reason behind these scenes or are they just a part of you that loves the more innocent side of growing up with horror films?

DT: I generally don't like humor in horror films so it's not that I want the viewer to laugh. But these particular sequences you are talking about are not meant to be scary. They're more outright weird, absurd. I guess some kind of wacky toy-like imagery is poking through. I don't know. These scenes may not work. They may be my mistakes. My intent was to illustrate the unreality of the situation, the artificial quality, the fakeness of it. It's like I'm putting it in quotes or something.

CC: The religious content is quite different in **HORROR** than **DESECRATION**; more fanatical and on the fringe, less Catholic and closer to evil yet still purveying that religious symbolism. Why did you go this route rather than the normal confines of Catholicism?

DT: The world we live in gets scarier and scarier and this is due to religious fanaticism. I wanted to portray a religion gone wrong, a kind of any-religion, a puritanical, almost Amish vibe. Something specific, like Catholicism, I did that already with

DESECRATION. I wanted something more all encompassing. You should feel like the end of the world is just around the corner.

CC: **DESECRATION** is now available from Image Entertainment on DVD. What is the future of **HORROR**? When will the genre fans be able to see the film and is there a theatrical release outside of film festivals in the works?

DT: Sure, **HORROR** will definitely get a release on DVD and VHS in 2003. We're in talks with a number of home video companies about distribution. There is possibly a limited theatrical release though there's no concrete guarantee at this point.

CC: Felissa Rose of **SLEEPAWAY CAMP** infamy has a cameo in **HORROR** and we see that she is now to star in your next project, **APPARITION**. We also talked in the past about your project, **SATAN'S PLAYGROUND**. Is this the same project renamed? What's next and what can you tell us about it?

DT: **SATAN'S PLAYGROUND** will be my third film; that's the one I'll shoot next. **APPARITION**, my ocean horror movie about supernatural riptides, will be fourth. Both will star Felissa Rose. **SATAN'S PLAYGROUND** is an all-out scare-fest with a vacationing family lost in the woods and the Jersey Devil lurking in the Pine Barrens. Ellen Sandweiss from **THE EVIL DEAD** will have a starring role, too. I promise to make it really frightening. The point of **SATAN'S PLAYGROUND** is not to be clever, arty or personal but just plain, old scary.

CC: Any comments about the state of horror films today in the U.S. and what are your thoughts on more mature handlings of the genre and others coming from outside the U.S. like Japan's **THE RING**?

DT: I never saw **RING** though I do want to see it. I'm really in my own fog these days, working on my own projects. I'd say the horror world has experienced a drought since 1987. It all stopped at **HELLRAISER**. That was the last great one, in my opinion.

CC: Standard questions to finalize: What and who are your biggest influences and what would you like to say to new film-makers? Anything at all you would like to say to our readers is also welcome!

DT: I'm probably most influenced by the surrealist painter Dali. I could only hope his energy passes through me from time to time. I love how he took his bizarre childhood memories and impressions and turned them into art. I'm inspired by movies like **DON'T LOOK NOW**, **NOSFERATU**, **THE EVIL DEAD**, **CARRIE**, **THE SHINING**, **LET'S SCARE JESSICA TO DEATH**, directors like my cousin, Alfred Sole, early Carpenter, early Cronenberg, early Romero. **THE TEXAS CHAINSAW MASSACRE** may be my favorite film of all time because it's so unbelievably unsettling. I'm inspired by the writings of Carlos Castaneda and lucid dreaming. In fact, one day, I'd love to do an adaptation of the book The Art of Dreaming. What would I like to say to your readers? I am not a Satanist. I am a Supernaturalist!

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THE TIME MACHINE

Directed by Simon Wells
2002 ♦ 96 minutes ♦ Letterboxed
DVD provided by DreamWorks
Review by Michael Mackie



"And what is time travel... but your pathetic attempt to control the world around you!"

Oh hooray. Oh joy. Oh overwhelming sense of inner warmth. It's another Hollywood remake of another classic film. Just what the world needed ch? So then, **THE TIME MACHINE** remade with a large budget by a big studio. You know the source material is sound. You know that it's going to be flashy and impressive to look at, it would be quite a shock if it wasn't, but is it worthwhile? Well, let's reflect for a moment... Really worthwhile remakes, yes, no problem. Carpenter's **THING** remake is still the king of the mountain and is, quite understandably, the first film that leaps to mind. Chuck Russell's **THE BLOB** is certainly no slouch either. Defi-

nitely a solid effort; that was 1988 though. Well damn, I seem to be having a hard time coming up with any notable genre remakes from the past decade or so. It's odd isn't it? I mean, considering how many there have been, this should be an easy task right? Okay, c'mon now, help me think up a nice horror or Sci-Fi remake from the past decade that didn't stink harder than your fat Uncle Jasper's last bean and wieners inspired bathroom holocaust. Let's all take a minute and see what we can come up with. Who said that? Who said **PSYCHO**? You there! In the back! Get out of here ya degenerate ya! There's always one isn't there, sheesh. Perhaps we had better come back to this later on. In any event, for better or for worse, here comes **THE TIME MACHINE**. So which is it? Better, or worse?

First off, some of you have probably noticed the name of the director and found yourself a little curious concerning his lineage. Yes, Simon Wells is actually related to H.G. Wells, Simon is his great grandson. So is this some sort of Hollywood gimmick? Well, perhaps not completely. Wells has been directing since 1991 so this is just a coincidence right? Okay, maybe not a complete coincidence but, cute marketing tactic or not, Wells is a director. Having come from a creative background firmly rooted in animated family fare such

as **BALTO** and **THE PRINCE OF EGYPT**, this genetically destined leap into live action must've been quite intimidating. Animated movies have to move at a certain pace; they flow differently than a live action film and if they don't then something just feels off. It stands to reason, then, that a live action film that has the pace of an animated film would come up lacking in some way, incomplete, unfulfilled. **TIME MACHINE** suffers a little in this way, more on that later.

Guy Pearce is Dr. Alexander Hartdegen, a specialist in the fields of applied mechanics and engineering. There are two primary ways that the good doctor seems to enjoy spending his free time. Firstly, he shares the company of his very good friend, David Philby, and complains about all the frustration that he feels having to work within the constraints of society's imposed norms. If it is not that then it is the love of his life, Emma. A normal and generally happy life is his, love, friends and his sure to be successful career. One loose end to tie up though; it's time to propose to Emma. Walking arm in arm together at a park seems the perfect time for Alex to pop the question, which he does. Almost the moment that Emma accepts, a robber appears from the bushes and in the chaos that ensues, Emma is shot and killed.