

THE DARKSIDE



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The Magazine of the Macabre and Fantastic



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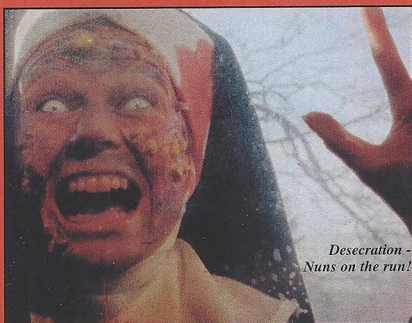
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DANTE'S INFERNO





Desecration - Nuns on the run!

From his current stance as a cult filmmaker to the forthcoming *Alice Sweet Alice* sequel – director Dante Tomaselli has style to spare, as Calum Waddell discovers...

Dante Tomaselli arrived on the horror scene with a bang – 1999's *Desecration*, the director's first full length feature, attracted critical acclaim from *Fangoria* in the States and Chas Balun and other noted genre writers. Once *Desecration* proved a hit on DVD, Tomaselli was able to secure funding for 2002's far superior *Horror* – which tells of a Satanic cult and features plenty of bizarre, dreamlike imagery. Rightfully seen as one of the most ambitious and visually impressive underground films of recent times, with a flair and talent that makes the finished result look much more impressive than its estimated \$250,000 budget, *Horror* makes for a worthwhile shocker. Released on Region 1 DVD this year by Elite Entertainment, the special edition of *Horror* has since gone on to be a surprise hit – even

outselling such films as *Red Dragon* and *Ghost Ship* on Amazon during its first week of release.

With a growing cult following for his incredible, atmospheric, Italian style shockers, Tomaselli now finds himself able to capitalise on his position as a cult innovator and take his style to a larger audience. His next film will be called *Satan's Playground*, and features a cast comprised of Ellen (*The Evil Dead*) Sandweiss, Michael (*The Hills Have Eyes*) Berryman and Felissa (*Sleepaway Camp*) Rose. However, the most exciting news for *Dark Side* readers may be that Tomaselli now owns the rights to his cousin, Alfred Sole's, classic *Alice Sweet Alice* and intends to start work on a direct sequel soon. In this exclusive chat, Tomaselli speaks about what fans can expect from the follow up and also the forthcoming *Satan's Playground*.

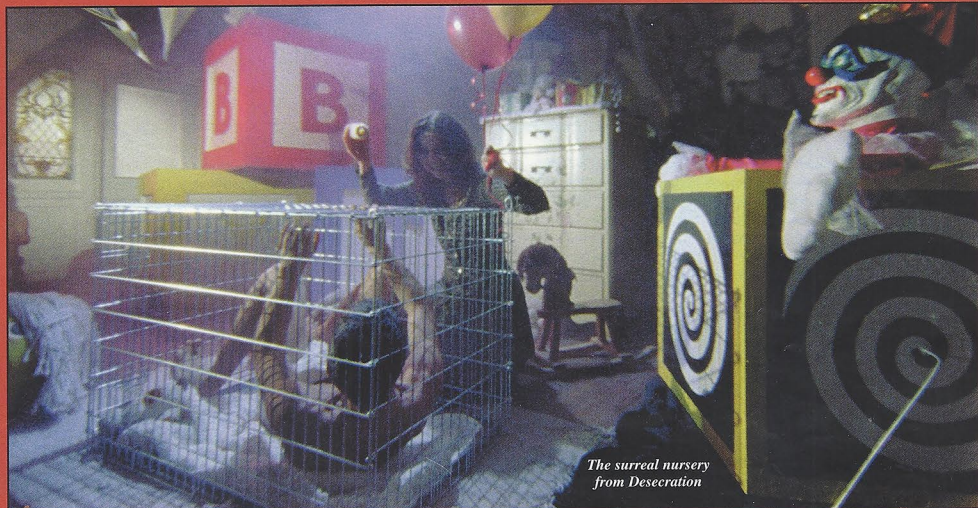
DS: Tell us about how you got started as a filmmaker.

Dante: I just always had an overactive imagination. In fact from as early as I can remember I wanted to be a horror film director. Everyone around me knew it – I was always known for loving horror movies. Growing up, I decorated my room like a funhouse... as you'd turn on the light switch, red eyes would appear and glow and there were masks, models and creepy posters everywhere. I listened to John Carpenter soundtracks religiously as well, but my father, for some reason, was very against my love of the macabre. One time, he came into my room and tore down all my posters proclaiming that they were bringing the house bad luck. I felt like the boy in *Creepshow* or *Salem's Lot*, but this only made me want to direct horror films even more. When I was 17, just as things were getting practically unbearable with my father – seriously, the tension was so thick – he died of a fatal heart attack. It happened in a very *Omen*-like way. It was July 5th, the day after

Independence Day, and we were all playing basketball at my sister's house in South Jersey – the entire family was there. My father and I had just gotten into another verbal fight so there was this coldness between us – nothing new – just the usual feeling and then, shockingly, he died. This left me with an intense guilt and at the same time a sense of freedom, but mostly it left me with sadness and nightmares. I always had bad dreams growing up, they were almost like supernatural experiences, but these new nightmares were beyond disturbing...

DS: What can you tell us about these nightmares?

Dante: My father was back and he had his suitcase and he was saying that he never died – these dreams were so real, and they seemed to go on for lifetimes while they were happening. We had a damaged parent-child relationship from the beginning to the end, that's for sure! After my father passed away, I made my first video horror short – it was of a Ouija Board session and I remember I used John Carpenter and Jean Michelle Jarre music in it. At that time, I didn't even consider I would have to get permission for that. Anyway, I used that video to get accepted into the film department at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, New York. I lived on campus there and made another video short. This one was called *Emotional Violence* and it was made when I was 18. It was colour-saturated, totally nonlinear, with themes running through it like suicide and child abuse... it wasn't very good but it was different. Then after changing universities and courses I started work on my first 16mm project, something called *Mama's Boy*. Again it had a nonlinear narrative and it was propelled by nightmarish imagery. It concentrated on a deranged mother feeding her caged child hallucinogens through a baby bottle! I submitted it to film festivals, but no one wanted it – funny enough! Throughout my twenties, I made many more versions of *Mama's Boy*, always trying to better the piece. Finally, instead of



The surreal nursery from Desecration

using an entire 16mm crew for the short, I shot a version myself on digital video and I incorporated bits from the 16mm **Mama's Boy** footage. This new one was called **Desecration** and it got accepted to a lot of film festivals. At one of them I met an investor called Jack Swain and I told him that I really wanted to expand the short into a feature. Swain bankrolled it for \$150,000, and I shot the full length version of **Desecration** on Super 16mm when I was 28.

DS: **Desecration** reminded people of the Italian style of genre filmmaking, so much so that some reviewers wondered if you were Italian yourself - what was your response to this?

Dante: Well, I am Italian in background, but I've only been to Italy once, and that was for the premiere of **Desecration** at the Fantafestival in Rome. I don't speak Italian, I mean, I know some but not enough to get by on. I guess my films resemble Italian films because there is something in the bloodline, but I'm not influenced by Italian horror films at all. I love them now, as an adult, and I've seen them in my twenties, but since I didn't grow up on Italian horror films it's impossible to say that I'm influenced by them. I hear that I'm replicating Italian horror films all the time and it's just not true. It's startling, the similarity between what I'm doing and the Italian classics so I can see why the reviewers say it, but it's not conscious and it's not planned or studied. My style of filmmaking is totally instinctive; it's almost like automatic writing... I'm a supernaturalist!

DS: But would you agree that the Italian horror genre has also spun out a lot of truly awful films. I mean for every **Zombie Flesh-Eaters** there's a **Zombi 3**...

Dante: Well, I feel that even the worst Italian horror films have some kind of visual flair, something unique enough to keep your interest. I'll give you an example. I was watching Fulci's **Demonia** recently for the first time, and while I didn't like the movie there were definitely many scenes where I was entertained visually. Some of those catacomb shots were so poetic, you could get lost in them... there's some kind of psychedelic, gothic insanity in an Italian horror filmmaker's psyche. Maybe it goes back to Renaissance painters...

DS: You shoot your movies on film, giving them a lavish appearance for their small budgets. Why do you insist on shooting on film?

Dante: Without a doubt, shooting on film gives a movie a more painterly look. I find video to be weak and dull, it's just too thin, too one-dimensional. It's good for short films, but not for features. I enjoy the grain and depth of film stock and I hate pixels. There's your answer.

DS: What are the challenges of working on low budgets?

Dante: It's a race against the clock! Each day you're moving against time, getting all the shots done. It's draining and challenging and

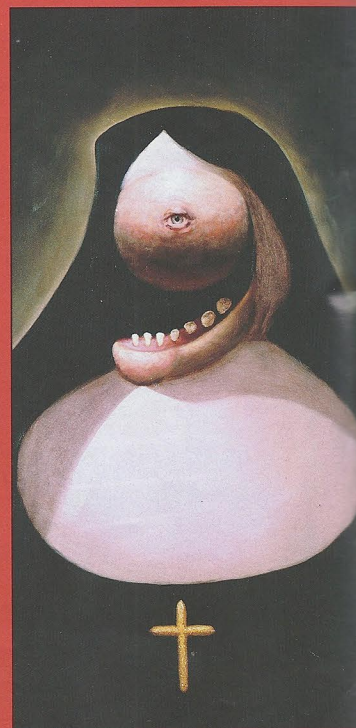
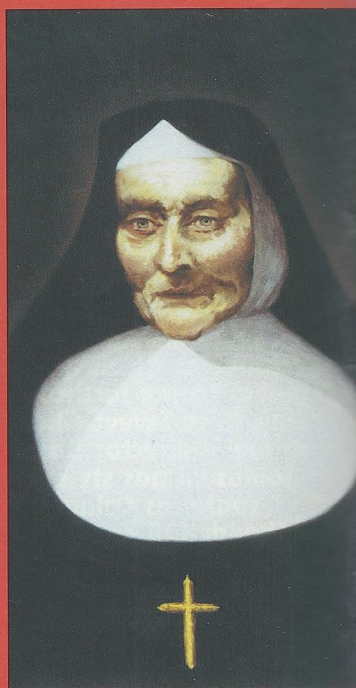
invigorating. I admit I'd love a larger budget so I'd be able to spend more time on each shot, but for now I'm young and I think I can stand the pace. I might remain an obscure cult item forever and always have to work on these low budgets, but I'm up for the challenge, just whatever it takes. I have so many more horror movies in me that need to come out and even with continuous low budgets I'll still always try to give it a kind of epic exuberance.

DS: How has the DVD of **Horror** sold?

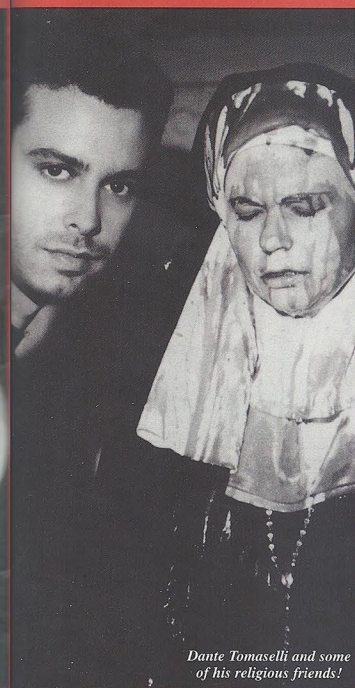
Dante: It sold very well - in fact **Horror** was an Amazon.com Top 10 Bestseller under different horror categories, selling right up there with **Red Dragon**, **The Mothman Prophecies** and **Ghost Ship**. Chalk it up to Internet buzz, because **Horror** had no television advertising. I am definitely pleased with the disc. I think Elite did a great job. It came very close to getting a cinema release in the States, but the problem was that the types of distributors that were willing to give **Horror** a limited theatrical release would not split the DVD rights. In other words, if I went with one of those questionable, relatively unknown distributors, they would demand to have the right to distribute it on DVD too. Ultimately, the DVD presentation was too important to me. Plus I knew the theatrical release, if it happened, would be fleeting. **Horror** is a cult horror movie and it's not to everyone's tastes...

DS: **Desecration** and **Horror** have been criticised, by some, for not making a great deal of sense and just being a series of bizarre images, how would you respond to this?

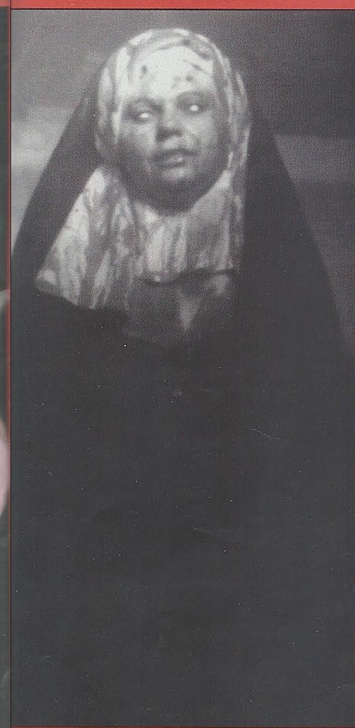
Dante: Ah yes, the harsh pundits. But what they fail to realise is that my films are purposely fragmented and dreamlike. It's not some kind of mistake! The critics who reviewed **Horror** and **Desecration** favourably were able to allow the films to wash over them. It's all about the state of mind of the viewer. If you can fall into the trancelike state I'm conjuring or trying to conjure, then it's working. I want to create subliminal films, hypnotic films, through dream language and sound design. If for some reason the viewer is receptive to it then that's great, but if not then I understand. It can go either way, and some people passionately hate my work. I've read some of the message boards... they can get evil. Some of them, like Mobius Home Video Forum, have some great, informative and passionate debates but too often are filled with snobby know-it-all screenwriter/director wannabes who are dying to break into the business but just can't and that's when the debates can get nasty and personal. It happens on all message boards. I'm not just singling out one. I've made a lot of good allies in the independent film community and just as many venomous enemies. Some of these self-styled critics are transparently jealous that they're not getting the chance to direct their own feature length films, and they look at me working with my low budgets, making my mark in the indie horror world and they say, "Hey, if he can do it can I?" So out of bitter-



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Dante Tomaselli and some of his religious friends!



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ness and unreasonably high expectations they lash out. I read a review like that recently on a site called Eccentric-Cinema. The writer thought that he could have done a much better job. If I knew him, I'd tell him, "Hey, I know you'd love to make your own feature film and have it distributed but it's a lot tougher than you think, buddy. Go through the process and then I guarantee you'll find it much more difficult to call my film a piece of shit."

DS: What is it you hope reviewers will see in your work?

Dante: That I'm trying to create horror art. I make no bones about it. If it annoys someone that they don't understand what they're watching while they're watching it, then they can easily dismiss my work. Some of my favourite albums I listened to the first time and hated, like Depeche Mode's **Black Celebration**. My films are designed to be watched more than once.

DS: Do you ever hope to make a more narrative driven film?

Dante: Yes, in fact **Satan's Playground** will be a more narrative driven film - or I should say it will have a more linear narrative. But I'm not sure if any of my films will be truly narrative driven. I like the atmosphere to dominate my movies. **Satan's Playground** is for all horror fans waiting for a truly unnerving, frightening movie. That's what I want to offer, as grandiose as it sounds. Instead of the overt ambiguity of **Horror** and **Desecration**, **Satan's Playground** will be straightforward, and I do understand that I need to try my hand at something like this, something not as abstract. I think the two feature films I've already done have narratives, in their own way, through visual metaphor and subtext, but they were not designed to entertain, they were there for me to work out my own nightmares. I was only thinking of myself while making **Desecration** and **Horror**, but now I want to integrate my nightmares with something a little more accessible. I really want to create a disturbing, scary monster movie for all horror fans to enjoy.

DS: What will the budget for **Satan's Playground** be?

Dante: If I get \$350,000 or \$400,000 - then I'll be able to do it on 35mm instead of Super 16mm. But the way it seems now, I'll probably be shooting **Satan's Playground** on Super 16mm with the same kind of low budgets I'm used to working on, maybe around the \$200,000 or \$250,000 range. I don't mind though, as long as I can shoot the film at all I'm happy. Though I would never succumb to a shot-on-video feature.

DS: What I admire a lot about your films is the gothic atmosphere and the fact they don't just revel in gore and nudity, as lots of lower budgeted horror titles do. How would you respond to the lower budget horror titles that just simply opt for "blood and breasts" to gain attention?

Dante: I really don't watch those films. Of

course I'm no prude, there is an exploitation streak throughout all my work, a sadistic emotional violence that I inject. Bloodstained nuns, evil priests... I can easily see how my films could be interpreted as exploitation horror films and in some ways they are, but overall I really don't think so. When a film is only about pure violence, for the sake of violence, I'm not interested. For example, those **Faces of Death** films, honestly, I've never seen even one. I'd like to think my movies are about peeling back layers of pain and guilt buried deep in the subconscious. With my next film, **Satan's Playground**, I'm going for visceral chills - it's an exercise in fear and suspense. I want the movie to shake up audiences much like **The Hills Have Eyes** and **Friday the 13th** did when they came out. I know that's what true hardcore horror fans really want right now - something rough and nasty. We've had enough comedy-horror films, enough suggestive horror movies. I say bring on the red stuff with frenzied, emotional, visceral terror! Unlike **Horror** and **Desecration**, **Satan's Playground** will be easy to understand, but what it will share in common with my first two films is that it will be atmospheric with an emphasis on picturesque cinematography and mood-drenched, elaborate sound design. But **Satan's Playground** will be scarier than my first two films... much, much scarier.

DS: How did Michael Berryman and **Evil Dead** star Ellen Sandweiss come to be involved in **Satan's Playground**?

Dante: I initially contacted Ellen through her Ladies of the Evil Dead website. I introduced myself and told her I was a fan of **The Evil Dead**. We developed a rapport online and then we spoke on the phone a few times. It seemed that we should definitely get together. So, last October I had a lunch meeting with Ellen and a PR person from Anchor Bay at the Chiller Convention in New Jersey. Ellen flew in from Michigan and **Sleepaway Camp** star Felissa Rose also attended the lunch meeting because she lives in New York. While we were all talking, I glanced over at the table behind us and saw a bald-headed man who looked vaguely familiar. When he swung around, it was Michael Berryman! Ellen said hello, because she already knew him because of the all the horror conventions, but I was dumbstruck. It was a wild moment because I was wearing a yellow **Shining** shirt that day and all of a sudden I heard a familiar voice... coming from the other table right in front of us - and who was it? The actor who played the ghostly bartender - Lloyd - in Stanley Kubrick's **The Shining**! Anyway, he said, "Great shirt" and told me who he was, but he didn't have to tell me... I mean I've seen **The Shining** probably over a million times. So, I started talking to him and turned around and realised that Michael Berryman was gone. We weren't even properly introduced, so a few weeks later I contacted his agent and he gave me Michael's home address in California. I sent a package out with the **Desecration** and **Horror** DVDs along with the **Satan's Playground** screenplay, outlining his role. He wrote me

back a nice note saying he's definitely interested in the role and being in my movie. I was so happy. **The Hills Have Eyes** is one of my all-time favourites - I saw it in a drive-in when I was only 8-years-old.

DS: Can you tell us a bit about the story?

Dante: It's about a vacationing family lost in the woods and the legendary Jersey Devil lurking in the shadows. Simple, stripped down terror. It's a survival tale - a monster movie.

DS: How did you come to hold the rights to the classic *Alice Sweet Alice*?

Dante: Well, I possess the original bound screenplay of *Alice Sweet Alice*, back when it was called *Communism*. The director, who is also my cousin, Alfred Sole, gave it to me many years ago. It says inside, "To Dante...You keep the spirit going, Alfred". The screenplay is my treasured good luck charm. I even bring it with me to special occasions. Anyhow, a few weeks ago, Alfred and I were talking on the phone and I was expressing to him my frustrations. It's so hard to get an independent film off the ground these days, it's positively nightmarish. Of course, he totally related, though he said the 1970s was a period that was much more nurturing for low budget horror filmmakers. We talked about some of the remakes coming out now - *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* and so on. And then all of a sudden he's like, "You have to do an *Alice, Sweet Alice 2*... it's gotta be you. I don't want anyone else touching it, I want you to direct the sequel" And I felt it was a dream come true! He said that I should use bits and pieces of the original in flashback or dream sequences, so I asked him how I'd be able to do that and Alfred told me, "Because I'm going to give you the rights to the film." A kind of passing on of the torch - I told him very emphatically that I could only hope to achieve a film as accomplished as his original masterpiece.

DS: Can you give us any exclusive information about the sequel?

Dante: Not right now, as I haven't finished writing it yet. I've been brainstorming though, it can go in so many different directions. One of my ideas is to have the Paterson community once again terrorised by a mask-wearing killer. There would be a haunting too, the poltergeist spirit of Karen from the first film would be haunting two jealous sisters, who are now living in the same apartment the Spages lived in. Like the original, there will be red herrings and you'll never be sure who the murderer really is until the end. If I don't write something satisfactory, I'll definitely be open to working with another writer or having another writer doing the screenplay to *Alice, Sweet Alice 2* completely. I'll welcome outside screenplays for this project because I know so many genre writers love this movie and feel that it is sacred. *Alice, Sweet Alice 2* will be a spine-tingling tribute to the original, with a giallo-like feel. I can't wait to incorporate the eerie musical score by Stephen Lawrence. I'll treat it with love and care, you can count on that!

DS: Will any of the original cast return?

Dante: I hope to have Brooke Shields in some kind of a cameo. We'll see. *Communism* (or *Alice, Sweet Alice*) was her very first feature film. In a way, Alfred discovered her. I'd love to have Paula Sheppard on board - but I hear she recently passed away. Maybe Mildred Clinton will return - she was spectacular in the original. I actually met her in 1997 when I was casting for *Grandma Matilda*, the lead role in *Desecration*. She was complaining about how her ankles still hurt from doing that scene in the abandoned building, during the first *Alice Sweet Alice*, where she bashes Dom in the face with bricks. Clinton is still acting - I've actually seen her in commercials on TV.

I'm ready to start shooting the sequel as soon as I have a good script and the financing together. I'll definitely be doing Satan's Playground first, though. That one is ready to go.



What a carve-up - the poster image from *Desecration*. A victim bites the dust, and Halloween and witchcraft combine in Tomaselli's Horror...