

# "SATAN'S PLAYGROUND"

## Pining for terror



What's scarier—the Jersey Devil you can't see, or the deranged family you can?

The familiar tale has been told countless times: En route to an idyllic camping retreat, an average family's car breaks down in the middle of desolate woodlands. In *Satan's Playground*, it's the mysterious Pine Barrens in New Jersey, where there have long been rumors of a lurking mysterious entity known as the Jersey Devil. Monsters both human and supernatural emerge from the tangled trees and swoop down on their unsuspecting victims, leading to a nightmarish struggle for survival. But in the same way we respond when Bob Dylan covers a classic ballad, it's the way the story is told that resonates.

Dante Tomaselli has been blazing new trails in the horror genre with his wildly hallucinogenic and surreal experiments in terror. *Desecration* and *Horror* were visceral and explosive, relying less on narrative than on feverish images and arcane themes. In a way, *Satan's Playground* (which Anchor Bay releases on special-edition DVD August 22) anchors the mania of Tomaselli's previous work with a classic genre narrative and gives him a foundation to build on.

"*Satan's Playground* has a more straightforward story," Tomaselli says. "It's not such an overt puzzle as my earlier films, though I'm still holding onto my dreamlike imagery. The story doesn't skip around in time like *Desecration* and *Horror*, but it's still enigmatic. *Satan's Playground* is really an old-fashioned horror movie—just laced with LSD. Every step of the way, I want the audience to have absolutely no idea what to expect next."

Growing up in New Jersey, Tomaselli was fascinated by the endless stretch of woods known as the Pine Barrens. "Even as a child, I felt a diabolical power emanating from that forest, from the land itself. I wouldn't dare set foot in those woods at night—ever!" he laughs, adding, "With *Satan's Playground*, I was trying

to harness that childlike wonderment. There's a texture to the trees, to the wild-life, that is completely distinct. It doesn't feel like any other part of New Jersey, or America. It has a fairy tale-like quality, like a demented children's book."

The legend of the Jersey Devil is vague, all depending on what version of the tale you subscribe to. "I went with the idea that, in 1735, an old, poverty-stricken, witchlike woman, Mrs. Leeds, gave birth to her 13th child," Tomaselli explains. "She sensed it was deformed, and cursed it. Lo and behold, the baby came out with bat wings, razor

claws and a dragonlike appearance. Legend says the deformity flew out of the chimney and has been haunting the Pine Barrens ever since."

But *Playground's* representation of the Jersey Devil is largely implied. "I didn't want a man in a suit or anything," Tomaselli says. "I made the entity invisible. Sometimes you think you see it, through shadows and sound, but it's kept mostly offscreen to underscore the idea that it could all be psychological, a product of madness. Plus, I like the idea that you never really know where it is. At any moment it could swoop down, claw out your throat and tear you to shreds."

In addition to the monster, the victims have to face Mrs. Leeds and her unusual children, who offer potential shelter that may in fact be a trap. Playing one of the family members is *Texas Chainsaw Massacre's* Edwin Neal. "I was

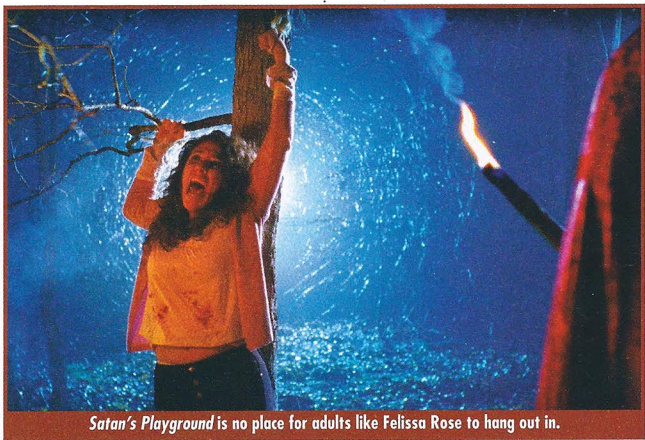
thrilled to have Edwin involved, because I love *Texas Chainsaw*," Tomaselli says. "His performance [as the hitchhiker] always chills me to the bone. He's a great actor, very caring, very conscientious. His role in *Satan's Playground* is a tease. You'll see more of him in future movies I direct, for sure."

The family of victims includes two more horror veterans: *Sleepaway Camp's* Felissa Rose and *The Evil Dead's* Ellen Sandweiss, who play sisters. "To see them in my own movie exhilarated me," Tomaselli says. "Ellen threw herself into the role, and she had flashbacks to *Evil Dead* while running through the woods. As for Felissa, it's like horror heaven. *Sleepaway Camp* left such a deep impression on me—not the movie itself, but her role as Angela. She conjured a surreal, brilliant performance."

The sanctity of family coming under attack by trauma and pain is a theme that resonates throughout all of Tomaselli's work, and gives *Satan's Playground* its harrowing depth. "I wanted to leave the viewer with the uneasy feeling that you are never safe, and that it's important to hold onto family. At any moment, your loved ones could be inexplicably taken away. In some ways the film is a parable, which mirrors suicide bombers and all the terror in the world these days."

Tomaselli's savage fable-telling will be taken to apocalyptic proportions in his upcoming *The Ocean* (co-written by Fango's Michael Gingold), which he hopes to shoot in late 2006. "It's about God's wrath—his punishment for our sins, the end of the world and the Earth being dominated by the sea. There are deadly niptides and a mysterious ebola-like virus spreading along the coast. *The Ocean* will be [an epic] horror film, but like *Satan's Playground*, *Horror* and *Desecration*, it's really about a family in deep psychic pain." What's most chilling is the human heart that beats inside his films—a despairing and angry one, and he uses the genre to explore that personal, dark place. "I'm replicating nightmares from my childhood, illustrating some portal to damnation."

—Jeremiah Kipp



*Satan's Playground* is no place for adults like Felissa Rose to hang out in.