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Essays and Interviews on Non-Mainstream Cinema Worldwide



Edited by
Matthew Edwards



The New Throwback: The Films of Dante Tomaselli

MATTHEW EDWARDS

Horror cinema once had the courage to provoke. The bulk of material currently produced, especially from Hollywood, simply retreads familiar ground. They replicate the successful formula of the slasher genre, except the level of violence is toned down. The new generation of horror films tend to have a polished MTV-style sheen, making it a much more marketable package for the 21st century cinemagoer. The films do not give rise to wider social or political issues (the original *Dawn of the Dead* is at its heart a critique on consumerism), or possess the fundamental desire to disturb the viewer. Worriingly, the new trend has seen horror cinema become more comedy-based. Horror cinema by its very nature is designed to unsettle. There are exceptions (*Evil Dead*), but those executives and producers who wield the power insist the two genres must unite—a delusional ideology. Horror cinema reduced to vox-pop entertainment. Non-conformity is the key reaction. The central idea for these new renegade filmmakers is to remain fiercely independent; to avoid being sucked into this whirlpool; to remain true to their vision.

Fighting against the corporations is Dante Tomaselli. His films are packed with disturbing and haunting imagery. By not complying with the mainstream, Tomaselli is forced to work on a restrictive budget. This does not deter him. This he turns into a positive. It gives him greater license to fulfill his vision. His imagination is allowed to flourish, his ideas explored without studio interference. Tomaselli has won many admirers, both on a critical and fan-based level, through his simple desire to get American horror cinema back on its limping feet.

Tomaselli's arrival on the horror scene has had an immediate impact. Representing a refreshing change of pace, his features *Desecration* and *Horror* offer an alternative viewing experience to the jaded horror fan. Distrustful of modern approaches towards horror filmmaking, Tomaselli influences have

stemmed from a fascination with seventies and eighties horror movies and through nightmares that plagued him throughout childhood. Recognizing the need to return to horror's roots, Tomaselli's films are drenched in atmosphere and suspense—his method of creating tension and horror. He is a self-confessed surrealist, and the non-linear approach his films employ allows Tomaselli to take the material into any direction he wishes. Not reined in by the constraints of a linear narrative, Tomaselli is free to explore territories of horror cinema that have been rarely tackled since the giddy horror boom of the seventies and early eighties.

For all the praise heaped onto Tomaselli, many critics are quick to point out that his films are reminiscent of the work of Italian horror director Dario Argento, with his expressionistic style and the use of vibrant and fluorescent visuals. Establishing a correlation is possible, yet such comparisons of Tomaselli and Argento are slightly misjudged. As Tomaselli pointed out to me, he was becoming tired of the comparisons made between himself and Italian horror icons Argento, Bava and Fulci, considering he wasn't even exposed to their work until his early twenties. In understanding Tomaselli's work it becomes more apparent that he has taken on board the key areas of horror cinema and woven them into a set of deeply personal nightmares, in an attempt to replicate them on screen. His style therefore is instinctual. Tomaselli is a throwback in the sense he has pulled out the strands that made seventies and eighties horror cinema so infamous, but ingrained this with a fresh new perspective.

Born in Paterson, New Jersey, on October 29, 1969, Tomaselli mostly spent his childhood years watching horror movies. Feeding his love, Tomaselli's mother would regularly take him to local theaters to check out the new releases. This experience taught him which concepts worked in horror cinema, eventually weaving them into his own personal style. Another factor that helped lead Tomaselli into filmmaking, giving him the belief and drive that he could achieve his ambition: His cousin Alfred Sole had directed the genre classic *Alice Sweet Alice*. Having studied filmmaking at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, Tomaselli directed the short film *Desecration*, before expanding the original idea into his debut feature.

Tomaselli's work can be broken down into a number of key components that associate him more firmly with seventies and eighties ideas towards horror filmmaking. By dissecting Tomaselli's method of portraying horror, his visual style, his interpretation of nightmares and his use of music, we can consider more fully the argument that Tomaselli is an important emergence in American horror cinema who has taken the ethics used by past filmmakers and brought forth a new breed of horror film.

The trap many filmmakers fall into is the mistaken belief that gross-out special effects and/or outrageously grotesque violence is the only way to

create cinematic horror. Realism in the portrayal of violence has been an effective method for filmmakers when depicting the horrors of crime and brutality. Equally, too much reliance has been placed on subjecting the viewer to disconcerting images, as a means of provoking a reaction—usually one of disgust, instead of the intended idea of instilling fear into the audience. Tomaselli opts for a differing cinematic experience, conjuring up horror and a brooding menace from the most unlikely of sources.

When considering the genre classics of horror cinema, taking *Halloween*, *The Shining* and *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* as examples, the violence is mostly implied instead of being explicitly shown. In fact, the splatter quota is relatively low in these films, thus signifying that to have achieved their status as recognized classics of both their genres and as cinematic entries, then they have derived their impact from other, and more successful, sources. By incorporating a number of less obvious elements, to strategically accentuate the horror, this has acted as a better tool for filmmakers working within this field.

Studying the features *Desecration* and *Horror*, similarities can be pulled from Tomaselli's work displaying an understanding of how classic horror films are constructed. As we have previously acknowledged, less is more. Leaving the viewer to fill in the gaps or slightly altercating reality and our perception, as a way of violating our senses, is the mark of a good horror filmmaker. Having established a formula, it is important therefore to evidence the connections between the format employed in classic horror films, and Tomaselli's work.

This relationship between Tomaselli's work and classic horror films can be determined in Tomaselli's skill at conjuring sudden pangs of horror derived from less obvious sources, turning what can be deemed as normal practices or objects into artifacts with the capacity of possessing a sinister and twisted edge. Tobe Hooper's *Poltergeist* illustrates this point. During the poltergeist's first real manifestation, Hooper effectively ups the ante through the simple use of a clown-like doll. It is a standard item in many children's toy boxes, yet it holds the unnerving qualities that can easily de-stabilize the audience. Slumped on a chair in a corner of the room, and despite its manic expression, the toy offers little threat, or is deemed un-noteworthy in relation to the other toys. The mood changes sharply when the young child is alone in his darkened room. Against the backdrop of a raging storm, the clown suddenly assumes qualities that distort our perception of the object. As light momentarily dances across the doll, the clown's fixed eyes and inscrutable grin hint towards the pending horror that is ready to ignite.

The idea that through the playful manipulation of our senses, by means of transporting objects that on the surface pose little significance into something that has the ability to bore into our psyche and disturb, can be considered a much better method of getting under the spectators' skin. After

watching *Poltergeist*, how many people would feel comfortable keeping a doll of a clown in their room? In both *Desecration* and *Horror*, Tomaselli likewise uses familiar objects, or childhood toys, as a means of driving conflicting emotions from his viewers. When we should be seeing items that bring pleasure or fondness, instead they are presented in a manner that conveys the exact opposite; for example in *Horror* Tomaselli's use of Halloween lanterns and paintings is used to startling effect.

In *Desecration* this is revealed in a scene where we see our young protagonist Bobby locked in a cage (draped in a diaper), inside a room filled with over-exaggerated childhood objects, making it seem like he has been trapped within a psychedelic funhouse. Giant toy blocks, balloons and dolls parade throughout the room, while an over-sized Jack in the Box springs maniacally up and down in a corner. The eerie nature of this scene is further accentuated when Bobby's mother enters the room, holding two balloons and a milk bottle. Yet, this is no ordinary feeding time as the mother kneels next to the cage and begins to spray her child with the milk, reveling in the torture she is administering. The central idea of the mother tending to her child, feeding her newborn within the child's nursery, has been turned on its head. Instead we are treated to this freaky act and immediately caught off guard. She does not offer her son protection or love, our perception of her is violated, and we view her as a threat.

This brings forward an interesting point. In the great traditions of horror cinema, the best films have always held a physical threat, whether implied or more explicitly revealed. *Halloween* and *The Shining* are fine examples of this idea. What is more important to consider, is that in both these cases the threat comes from within the nuclear family.

This same idea is explored by Tomaselli in both *Desecration* and *Horror*. Whereas the conventional idea that the family is symbolic of security, comfort, and love, this notion has been turned upside down, to the extent where the family is perceived as mistrustful and suspicious, with the potential to inflict pain on their loved ones. In *Desecration* Tomaselli explores the relationship between a young adolescent boy and his long-dead mother, culminating in a trip into Hell to confront her. In *Horror* our young protagonist Grace is enslaved by her parents through a combination of drug addiction and psychic brainwashing. Her only savior seems to be her grandfather, who reveals the true nature of her parents' warped pastimes. However Grace is ultimately betrayed when his true identity is revealed: He too is a sadist who tortures Grace with the same joy as her parents.

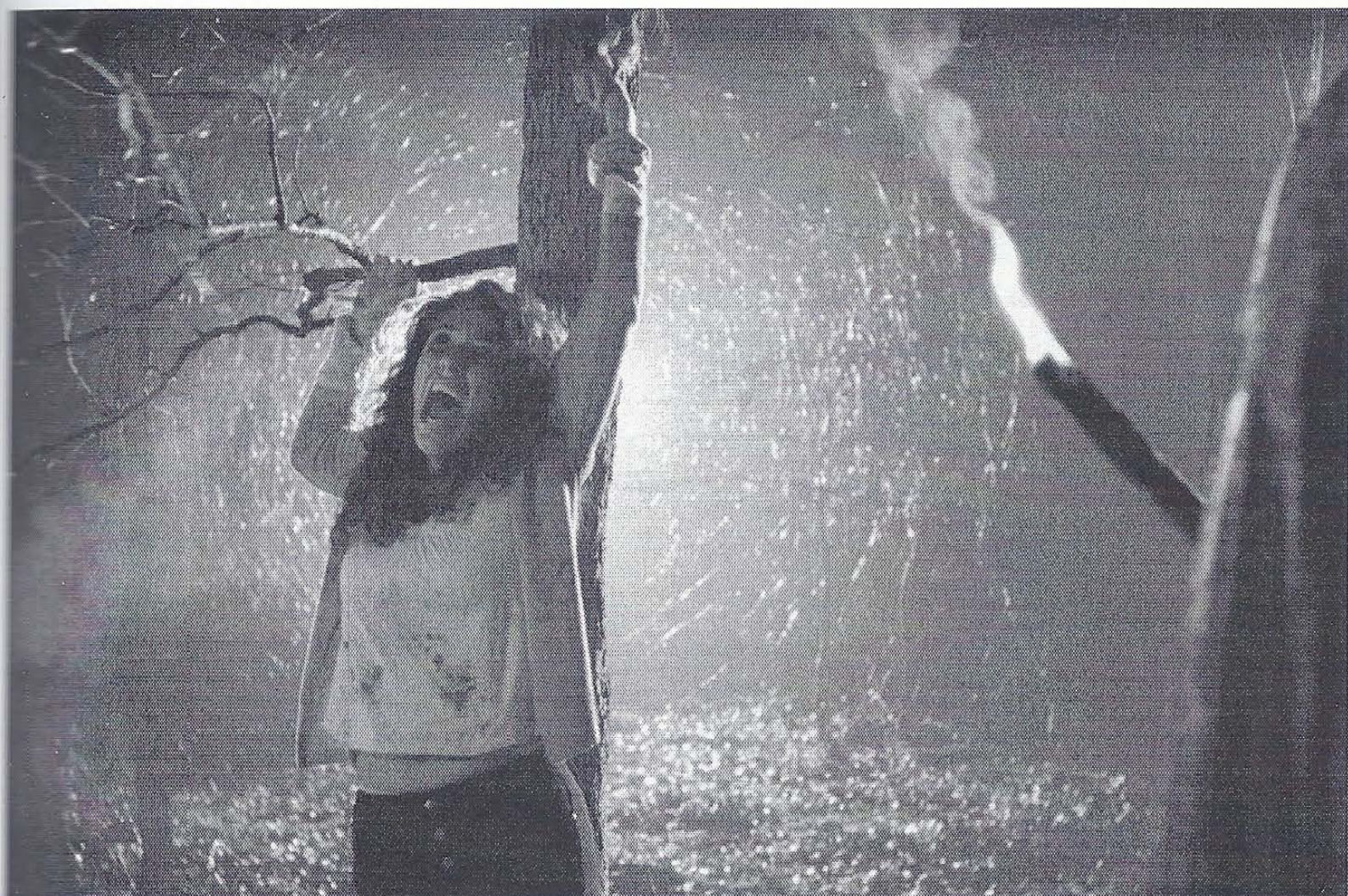
Commenting on both films, we can clearly establish that their protagonists are not part of a stable family unit, but a family unit that is broken and at conflict. Through this instability Tomaselli is able to manipulate certain family traditions and practices, presenting them in a weirdly creepy and offbeat

fashion. In one instance in *Horror* we witness Grace in hospital, receiving a visit from her father. Clearly not distressed, and lacking any emotion, the father leans over his daughter and whispers, "I am going to stay here with you tonight," before administering an incestuous kiss. Grace's parents are painted as sadistic and abusive, ready to violate her at any point. This immediately identifies the family as a severe threat, demonstrated further in *Horror* when we witness both parents entering Grace's room and drugging her. What makes this an ordeal is that both the parents gleefully enjoy this ritual, culminating in the father licking the syringe he has just used to administer drugs into his daughter.

Tomaselli's exploration of this theme, the threat coming from within the family base, connects with his own personal experiences as Tomaselli has asserted in many interviews that he was constantly in conflict with his father. This may account for the reoccurrence of this theme in Tomaselli's work, as the family is not portrayed with any unique bond, but a base with a simmering undercurrent that is ready to boil. Whether this theme is deliberate or subconscious, what we can ascertain is that Tomaselli's films partly concern the breakdown of the family unit, and the psychological effects that this can have. As the family base disintegrates, paranoia and fear invade, where the final climax inevitability turns into violence and destruction.

A characteristic trait that occupies the work of Dante Tomaselli is his artistic visuals and use of atmosphere. This directorial style has been influential in the disturbing and shocking imagery within his films. Tomaselli's aesthetic approach differs greatly from his contemporaries. Whereas a masked murderer slicing through victims is about as scary as Ed Wood's awful classic *Plan 9 from Outer Space*, in contrast the image in *Desecration* of a faceless nun in the mist most definitely is scary. Both *Desecration* and *Horror* contain numerous visually stylized set-pieces that reinforce the notion that horror cinema is at its most effective when combining these elements cohesively, instead of resulting to cliché through poorly executed cinematic offerings that offer little more than half-naked women being stalked and butchered. American horror cinema is still under the misguided belief that churning out horror films of this type is the best practice, when in reality they are setting themselves up for ridicule. The stalk and slasher genre had its glory days back in the seventies and eighties, but now the whole idea seems contrived and lame. The *Scream* films merely parodied the genre, mocking the narrative devices these films used—and inadvertently kickstarted a whole string of films destined to go no further than the bargain bin of numerous rental outlets.

Through close scrutiny of Tomaselli's work we can identify specific examples that rightfully distinguish Tomaselli as a director with flair, when styling sequences that are both visually arresting and heavy on atmosphere. Certain examples immediately spring to mind, and can be deemed genuinely



The sadists are loose in Satan's playground. Actress Felissa Rose, of *Sleepaway Camp* fame, in a tight spot in Dante Tomaselli's gothic nightmare *Satan's Playground* (courtesy Dante Tomaselli).

frightening moments. In one *Horror* scene we see Grace being chased by her mother. Fleeing down a flight of stairs, Grace rushes towards the front door, only to find it locked. Tomaselli has edited this scene in a manner that incorporates interesting shots that heighten its weird and horrifying nature. The first establishing shot sees the camera static as we witness Grace charging down a flight of spiraling stairs, closely followed by her mother. The next shot sees the camera positioned at the foot of the staircase, where the chase is seamlessly continued. Fairly standard so far, yet interestingly Tomaselli now adopts a combination of point of view shots that elevates the sequence into more terrifying realms. The first shot implies that we are looking through the mother's eyes as she is racing towards her daughter, while the shot that immediately follows indicates we are seeing this from Grace's perspective. Therefore we clearly see the reactions of both the prey and the predator. The terrified expression of Grace is juxtaposed with the eerie sight of her mother's twisted smile and dead eyes. Furthermore, there is an unearthly and supernatural quality that is present. Tomaselli's camera glides effortlessly down the hall, giving off an aura that the mother is floating, therefore adding to the nightmarish effect of this scene.

It is fair to comment that both *Desecration* and *Horror* rely exclusively on their visuals, incorporating gothic tendencies fused with the surreal use of

pop-art colors. Tomaselli mainly utilizes icy blue tones and fluorescent reds in his work, drenching the landscape with an expressionist sense of the macabre. A swirling mist is everpresent, cutting up the landscape, allowing for unknown forces to lurk within the shadows. This is best represented in a *Horror* scene where we witness a woman running out into a snowswept forest, frantically trying to flag down a passing car. A solitary tree stands in the middle of the frame, from which a hooded figure emerges, clutching a spade. This unexpected moment is decidedly creepy, offset even more by the strange atmosphere. The pure white snow has been replaced with a cold blue glaze, while the tree resembles a black monolith, devoid of character. The faceless killer emerges nonchalantly, ready for the kill.

Part of the genetic make-up of Tomaselli's films stems from nightmares from his boyhood and adolescent years. These nightmares have impacted greatly on Tomaselli's work to the point that he has looked to interpret them within the framework of his own movies. *Desecration* and *Horror* are punctuated with numerous dream sequences, indicating justifiably that Tomaselli has set about to replicate the feel of these experiences. In many respects we could argue that Tomaselli's films are essentially his way of capturing and painting these experiences onto celluloid. On many occasions Tomaselli has referred to these nightmares as being very vivid and real, and left a clear imprint within his psyche. We can argue that the nightmares we see in both *Desecration* and *Horror* are effectively his visual interpretation of the traumatic dreams he frequently encountered as a youngster. Considering that Tomaselli layers and constructs his film around these dreams and nightmares is suggestive of their key importance within the context of his films. Instead of using them for purely a narrative function, Tomaselli essentially propels his films into motion by their inclusion. Their function is to add a surrealist element into the proceedings, and to make the viewer wonder, "Is this real or not." Such is the structure of Tomaselli films that we begin to question whether what we are witnessing is real or the psychological nightmares of our particular protagonist. This leads to multiple interpretations, giving the viewer greater license to absorb and reflect on the film, instead of having to endure a horror film that offers little in thought and follows the well-trodden path so many other films have followed.

Tomaselli's nightmares were both nasty and disturbing in content, so it seems quite apt that they represent some of the most unnerving and frightening aspects of his work. Both *Desecration* and *Horror* contain some truly weird and frightening dream sequences. In particular, *Desecration* reveals one memorable nightmarish dream where we witness a nun being ravaged by two freaky circus clowns. Situated behind an iron gate, and surrounded in a thick pink mist, the nun frantically clutches onto the railings attempting to pry them open. The clowns descend onto her like starved vultures; her habit

stained with blood. The macabre final shot sees the clowns slowly opening the iron gate for her, but her lifeless eyes and ghastly demeanor reveal she is no longer of this world—she is undead.

Another important feature in the films of Dante Tomaselli is his use of music as a means of increasing their haunting nature. As a general rule, music can lend itself superbly to horror pictures, creating the right mood and atmosphere when used correctly. In Hollywood's horror cinema their manifesto towards music reveals that its design is to specifically dictate how you should feel. During quiet and romantic interludes the music suitably fits the mood. Likewise, during moments intended to provide shocks, this is aptly represented with quick short-fire bursts of music. In contrast, influential soundtracks like *Halloween*, *The Exorcist* (through the use of Mike Oldfield's *Tubular Bells*) and *Suspiria* all feature a particular signature song that sets the tone for the movie. What defines *Suspiria* as one of the scariest movies of all time is Goblin's legendary soundtrack, both deafening and brimming with a suitably eerie texture, making it sometimes sound like a perverse nursery song. Tomaselli has recognized the importance of the soundtrack, realizing that both the marriage of visuals and music is fundamental in horror cinema. His dedication to ensuring that both merge together seamlessly is a testimony to his commitment. Composing and designing his own soundtracks, through layering synth tones and samples, has helped his films take on a more trance-like feel, further accentuating the horror.

Operating outside the commercial mainstream has undeniably allowed Tomaselli to compose films that utilize the basic rudimentary principles of classical horror filmmaking. This is where Tomaselli has excelled. By incorporating this retro stance into his directorial and narrative style, he has conjured moments that get beneath the skin of the viewer, consequently leaving a lasting impression. Painting the frames with haunting images that strike a powerful chord with the spectator, reflects a filmmaker more concerned with the mechanics of horror cinema, as opposed to an onslaught of visceral imagery.

Tomaselli's latest offering *Satan's Playground* indicates that Tomaselli's creative vision is pulling together more with each passing picture. On one level *Satan's Playground's* premise seems to be a nod to *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* and *Evil Dead*, yet the wave after wave of gloomy and macabre imagery is suggestive that *Satan's Playground* has the potential to be much more than a lame rehash of horror cinema's most established films. *Satan's Playground* is certainly Tomaselli's most stylized work. We witness the camera methodically creeping through New Jersey's Pine Forest, or eerily gliding down half-lit corridors, that hint towards an unknown presence, lurking, waiting to attack. This idea, as we have already discussed, generates far more horror, by the simple means of signaling a perceived threat, but *not* to illustrate or reveal the true nature until the climax.



Demonic daughter! Actress Christie Sanford as the evil daughter in *Satan's Playground*. Sanford has appeared in Dante Tomaselli's two previous features, *Horror* and *Desecration* (courtesy Dante Tomaselli).

Satan's Playground is very much retro in style and execution, as the film is representative of many elements that can be associated with classics of horror cinema. We can establish similar tracking shots and point-of-view shots that have been inspired by *Evil Dead*, but Tomaselli has injected a fresh perspective onto a widely copied shot, culminating in an inventive variation. Although the film displays *Evil Dead*-esque moments, in that we witness a character being chased through the woods by an unknown force, Tomaselli expands on this style of filmmaking by having his camera sweeping down from the pine trees, attacking the victims. *Satan's Playground* does reveal a scene straight out of *The Shining*, where our protagonist is locked in a small room and an axe comes crashing through the door. You kind of expect to see Jack Nicholson peer through the gaping hole. This is not implying that plagiarism is at hand. It merely serves to point out that we have gone full circle, by means that the new generation has reinterpreted styles and concepts, as a means of creating original work. All artists learn from others—it's an essential component that feeds and inspires our own creativity.

Dante Tomaselli is an interesting anomaly in American horror cinema: He understands the basic principles of horror filmmaking as a means of extracting the correct emotions from his audience, without pandering to more conventional tactics of spraying the screen with graphically ripe images. Splatter

films rightfully have a place in cinema, as demonstrated by successful filmmakers like Herschell Gordon Lewis, primarily because they have recognized the need for their work to not be taken too seriously. It has been unsurprising then that critics have cast their critical eyes upon Tomaselli's films with some authority. Tomaselli's work has its cinematic roots more closely associated with the horror cinema of yesteryear, as opposed to the current breed of offerings that pour out from the American market. Tomaselli's work is retro in style and structure, taking what was successful during horror cinema's glory days and simply transporting it into contemporary filmmaking.

Tomaselli's penetration into the horror community has been more noticeable by his love of the genre, and his clear manifesto—to create a body of work that sets out to embed a sense of dread and fear into the spectator. Both *Horror* and *Desecration* display the key elements required to create a successful horror picture—suspense, shocks, gore and, to some degree, a sense of realism. *Desecration* and *Horror* prove that Tomaselli is an exciting discovery. The promising nature of his work suggests that if Tomaselli can remain true to his artistic sensibilities, it will only be a matter of time before he delivers a film on a par with the retro horror classics he so treasures.



Tomaselli regular Danny Lopez with the late Irma St. Paule in *Satan's Playground*. Irma St. Paule also appeared in Dante Tomaselli's debut feature *Desecration*. She sadly passed away on 6th January 2007 (courtesy Dante Tomaselli).

An Interview with Dante Tomaselli

MATTHEW EDWARDS: *Do you feel like you're part of a new vanguard of filmmakers that are reacting against the current trend of "horror movies"?*

DANTE TOMASELLI: At this point, yes I do. But then again, I'm a surrealist first ... a filmmaker second. So I march to the beat of my own drummer anyway. But yeah, I hate most modern horror films; they're not even real horror films anyway, in my opinion. All the good ones stopped around the mid-to late eighties. *Hellraiser* was the last great one. I do feel part of this new wave of horror filmmakers. I want to try to help bring back true horror.

Your three films have been strictly independent features, but interestingly they have all gained widespread acclaim and interest. How have you managed to provoke interest in your work?

I think maybe because I am sticking to my guns and making the movies I want to make. And maybe there's a connective style that some people appreciate, if you're into dreamlike movies. I don't know. I definitely only want to make horror films. That's where my passion is. There's really so much to explore. I'm so fascinated by the supernatural! I would like to investigate ghosts, haunted houses as an alternative career. Parapsychology is very interesting. All my films are explorations into the supernatural and the paranormal. You can always be sure that I'll be trying to make each film scarier than the last. I think I am a unique director in the sense that—that is my goal, aside from translating my nightmares. I want each film to be more frightening. It's like each film is a funhouse ride for me. Of course I want each new one to be more effective.

How much of a struggle is it for you to compete against glossy high-budgeted horror films like the Scream franchise and Jeepers Creepers? Do you even care whether you do or not?

Oh, I don't think about other films at all. I'm completely in the mindset of the movie I want to make. I don't feel any sense of competition, especially since those films you mentioned cost many millions. I like being different; I want my films to be an alternative to what's out there in the horror world. I don't pay attention to trends. I know what I like. I'm stuck in the seventies, early eighties.

I do get a sense that your films are trying to connect back with seventies and eighties horror cinema, with their strong emphasis on atmosphere, tension and visuals as shock tactics—instead of the tried-and-tested formula of blood and guts. This I believe has made you one of the most interesting new filmmakers to have emerged out of American independent cinema. Are you aware of your importance as a filmmaker, especially to the horror community?

Thanks. Ummm ... yes and no ... I feel I am not really embraced by mag-

azines like *Fangoria*. Yeah, I'll get a one-page article here and there when the DVD is released by Image or Elite but ... well ... I get e-mails a lot from people wondering why I'm not in there more. And I don't know how to answer them. So I feel there is this club that I am not a part of. I mean ... I never get mentioned when [*Fangoria* editor Tony] Timpone talks about the "new wave of horror filmmakers." You know the names ... I don't even have to tell you. I'm always left out. Maybe he's waiting for me to make a hit, then things will be different ... hmm. *Rue Morgue* shows their support. And of course, *Deep Red* magazine ... Chas Balun was one of the earliest supporters of my work. And I am really grateful, because I always loved reading his bombastic articles in *Gorezone* magazine growing up. For as many good reviews that I get, there are lots of critics who hate me and my films with a passion. I seem to polarize audiences. So I guess the answer is that I feel a mixture of insecurity and, I guess, to some degree, a sense of confidence about my status in the horror community. I'm an outsider. I always will be. Astrologically, I'm a Scorpio with my Sun in the First House.

Talk us through the filming process of your latest film Satan's Playground. Did working on a tight budget hinder the production at all?

Actually *Satan's Playground* had my highest budget of all so far ... somewhere around \$500,000. But of course, in the scheme of things, \$500,000 is



Actress Ellen Sandweiss, star of *Evil Dead*, in Dante Tomaselli's brilliant horror shocker *Satan's Playground* (courtesy Dante Tomaselli).

nothing compared to how much most features cost. I think, with horror films, working on a relatively low budget is a good thing. Think of all the classics ... *Night of the Living Dead*, *Halloween*, *Phantasm*, *Texas Chain Saw Massacre* ... I can go on. But you get the point ... all low-budget and all quality scary movies. But if you want to make a really classy movie, something ultra-polished like *The Shining*, *The Changeling*, *The Exorcist*, *The Omen* ... you'll need a few million at least.

The filming process? Basically I start off with a script that I'm passionate about, something I feel I need to make. Then I go and find the appropriate actors, because you need a package—something to show to the executive producer or investors. Finally, hopefully things gel into me actually making the movie—through the sheer force of my will! I start hunting for locations. That's the fun part. For *Desecration*, I explored places from my childhood, like Paterson, New Jersey. With *Horror*, I got to explore a very gothic area of upstate New York, called Warwick ... very Salem Witch Trial-like ... lots of rolling hills and infinite horizons. And for *Satan's Playground*, I got to explore the creepy area known as the Pine Barrens in New Jersey. A huge stretch of woods, with the legend of the Jersey Devil alive and thriving. So, once I lock down on locations, I start making presentations to an executive producer, telling them I'm basically ready to go. Once it's given the green light, I work with the cinematographer and we storyboard for about a month. All the while I'm having rehearsals with the actors and attending auditions for roles that haven't been filled. I work with the art department and special effects supervisor and try to tell them my vision ... what I am seeing. Finally, the shoot date looms closer and it's usually pushed back a bit, sometimes a month or two or more. It feels very organic ... and comes alive when it wants to. So many elements have to be set in place. After principal photography, I start to get to know the footage inside and out. I become obsessed with it. At the same time, I'm planning the soundtrack, working with different composers and designing soundscapes. Finally, when picture edit is locked, I start the sound mix, which is my favorite part, actually.

You work with a close-knit group of people on your films. Is this an essential component for any independent filmmaker?

I'm not sure. But it works for me. I'm very loyal too. I do expect the same back. It's a synergy that has to exist, or it won't work at all. I especially enjoy working with my script supervisor, the art department, the cinematographer, the effects supervisor, assistant director and on set with the actors. Once it's shot, "in the can" as they say, I love the period of working with my editor. But like I said, hands down, my favorite part of the whole filmmaking process is working on the sound mix. I love designing the soundtrack.

Your next proposed project is a sequel to your cousin's film Alice Sweet Alice.

Is there a sense of pressure on you to deliver a film on a par with what has been regarded as a masterpiece of horror cinema?

I really can't speak for that film yet, because I am finishing off *Satan's Playground*. And, mainly because I've decided that I want my next film to be *The Ocean*, a supernatural horror film set on an island. There will be demonic possessions, riptides, nature running amok and, at the core, a haunting brought on by grief and guilt.

How easy is it for you now to get your films funded? Are there many avenues open to horror filmmakers?

Hopefully, it'll get easier. I will pursue it relentlessly! I have a feeling I'll always somehow get the money I need to make the movies I want. The horror movies I want. As long as I keep them relatively low-budget.

Do you intend to keep working within the confines of independent cinema, or is the lure of Hollywood too tempting?

Independent cinema. I need a degree of creative control. I'm more impressed by Felissa Rose or Ellen Sandweiss than Meryl Streep.