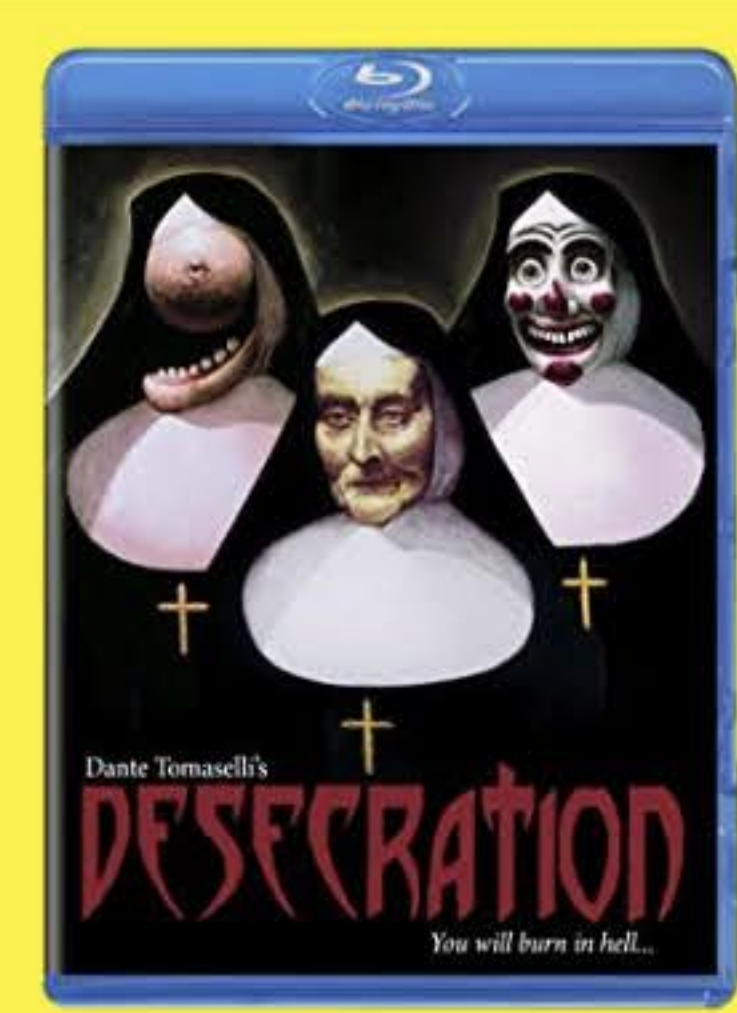


DESECRATION



Young Bobby (Garret Montanez) witnesses the mysterious death of his mother Mary (Christie Sanford) in his bedroom one evening. His cries are overheard by his Italian grandmother Matilda (Irma St Paule), who races to his rescue.

Fast-forward eleven years, and we discover that Bobby (now played by Danny Lopes) is a sixteen-year-lad who's in serious danger of flunking at St Anthony's Catholic Academy. Perhaps this is because he spends more time flying his electronically motored toy plane on the school's grounds than attending classes. Alas, one afternoon his plane loses control and careers into an unsuspecting nun's face. Significantly, the nun in question - Madeline - is a dead ringer for the late Mary (and is also portrayed by Sanford).

Bobby is understandably upset by the above action, especially as it resulted in the nun's instant death. Worse still, the incident soon appears to have been the catalyst for a sequence of increasingly sinister, unexplainable events.

Bobby starts seeing faceless nuns prowling the academy's grounds; creepy shadows crawl over the school's walls; objects begin to move of their own accord; Matilda completes a jigsaw at home, only to discover it predicts an ill-fate for her beloved grandson. This latter point prompts Matilda to contact the school with her concerns. She also tells Bobby's slacker father (Salvatore Paul Piro), but he's aware that the old lady is on medication and doesn't take her claims too seriously.

On the contrary, things are getting very serious indeed. While out jogging with classmate Sean (Mark Mamone) one morning, Bobby witnesses his pal fall into an eerie pit positioned in the heart of the woods. When he tells his most trusted teacher, Nicolas (Vincent Lamberti), about this, the pair of them race back to the scene of the accident ... only to find the pit has vanished, along with Sean.

That's not all. People start getting seriously hurt. Not least of all an unfortunate sister who takes the sharp end of a pair of scissors which start flying in her direction of their own accord.

It all gets stranger and stranger as the plot unfurls in nightmarish fashion, a threadbare narrative delicately linking one set-piece after another together. More deaths, more spooky weirdness, and increasingly oppressive score - which at times resembles an overhead storm - are all on the cards as Bobby becomes more and more threatened by his school surroundings and all leads point to his late mother, described at one point by Matilda as having been a "saint". Could it truly be that her dead soul is trapped in Hell, and she's using her own son in an attempt to escape her own fate?

DESECRATION was the feature debut of writer-director Dante Tomaselli. It was completed in 1999 and is clearly a low budget endeavour (the Internet Movie Database estimates its overall budget as having been \$150,000.00). It may have certain restrictions as a consequence, but that doesn't stop DESECRATION from emerging as one of the most ambitious indie horror pictures of the 1990s.

It references a lot of cinema. We get nods to DON'T LOOK NOW (a tale of a psychic and a little girl who died under water), ALICE SWEET ALICE (a very heavy dose of Catholic questioning, along with claims that a dead relative has returned to cause havoc - hardly surprising as the film opens with a thank you to ALICE's director Alfred Sole, who also happens to be Tomaselli's cousin), SUSPIRIA (a teenager at war against evil forces while boarding at an increasingly insidious school) and so much more.

Crucially, DESECRATION does this while retaining an identity of its own. Tomaselli is clearly very cinema-literate. There are echoes of Dario Argento and Ingmar Bergman throughout, as well as a distinct flavour of David Lynch at times: the curious offbeat atmosphere lurking beneath the surface, the quirky characters who just seem peculiarly "off". Tomaselli has an eye for the surreal, the quietly unnerving, imbuing virtually every scene with something to keep us on edge, no matter how subtle. It's certainly bordering on the surreal but the narrative is linear enough to keep less adventurous viewers engaged.

Sure, some of the performances are lacking. St Paule sometimes sounds like she's reading for a Dolmio advert, "he's a-coming", "she's a-still here" etc. But you soon attune to such quirks and it all adds to the charm. The key to the occasionally gory DESECRATION's success lies within its rich atmosphere, which is aided to no end by Tomaselli's freaky imagination, Brendan Flynt's impressive cinematography and a stylish, frequently claustrophobic score from the director and his brother Michael.

DESECRATION comes to region-free blu-ray courtesy of the ever-interesting Code Red.

The film is presented uncut (87 minutes and 35 seconds in length), and gains the benefit of full 1080p HD resolution. There is a text disclaimer on the disc prior to the movie's beginning, which explains how the Super 16mm elements are seemingly forever lost, and so this transfer has been struck and up-converted from a Dig beta source. This prepared me for the worst, but I have to say I found this a solid prospect for the most part. There is a generally soft feel, sure, but this looks filmic for the majority of playback, exhibiting a natural-seeming sense of depth, healthy colours and deep, untroubled blacks. Just remember the medium on which it was shot and its budget, and keep your expectations in check perhaps. But this is the best you'll have ever seen this film, and I for one am very happy with the results. The film is presented, ostensibly, in 1.85:1. Although it's slightly window-boxed with narrow black bars on three sides of the screen, everything appears to be correctly framed.

English 2.0 audio is given the DTS-HD treatment and is very clean throughout, offering an effectively well-balanced aural experience.

The disc opens to a static main menu page. There is no scene selection option. However, you can traverse through the film - should you wish - by way of 11 remote control-accessed chapters.

Extras begin with the option to play the film with the accompaniment of Tomaselli's most recent album of haunting sounds, "Witches". This is a 13-track album which is presented here in its entirety. It mixes Carpenter-esque electronica with eerie aural sounds and jarring vocal samples. It fits the onscreen visuals quite well. My advice would be to avoid dropping acid while perusing this option, as I imagine it would truly fuck with your head.

You can also select a new audio commentary track recorded for this release by the director. We learn that the 20-day shoot began in 2007, in New Jersey, when former art student Tomaselli was just 28 years old. He leads us through each scene, revealing that ALICE's Mildred Clinton also auditioned for the role of Matilda. Perhaps it's good that St Paule got the part: she became a friend of the filmmaker as a result. It's a very honest, mainly fluent chat track which reveals a lot of cinematic references and discusses the themes covered in the film. There's a healthy amount of childhood anecdotes, and it's good to know that the film was received passionately upon its premiere in Italy. Tomaselli cites Depeche Mode, The Cars and John Carpenter among his music influences.

Next we get a nice 2-and-a-half minute trailer which captures the film's dreamy, off-kilter atmosphere and keen visuals.

The original short film version of DESECRATION from 1996 follows, presented in window-boxed 1.33:1. It's essentially a fever dream, but you can definitely see how this led to its feature counterpart.

A generous stills gallery runs the course of 3 minutes and is accompanied by a typically haunting score. This features lots of behind-the-scenes stills, promotional materials and cover artwork from various releases of years gone by.

"Building the Torture Chamber" is a 12-minute featurette in which Tomaselli speaks of the nightmares he suffered as a child which influenced his approach to filmmaking, along with insight into his forthcoming ALICE SWEET ALICE "reimagining" and some most welcome storyboard insights.

Finally there's a 2-minute video introduction which Tomaselli recorded for the Elmsta 3000 Horror Fest in Sweden, in which he makes mention of ALICE and his other forthcoming project THE DOLL - promised to be his goriest offering yet - along with the aforementioned "Witches" album.

DESECRATION is a daring, bold directorial debut from a filmmaker who continues to impress by playing to his own rules. It gets a good upgrade here from Code Red (caveats in the review above) and is furnished with a generous array of pertinent bonus features.

Review by Stuart Willis

Released by Code Red

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