

screenings

Horror auteur mines his dreams

BY BOB CAMPBELL
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

N.J.—Horror capital of the free world

There's more than one film industry, more than one New Jersey and more than one reality.

The state isn't just the location of choice and/or convenience for studio productions and home base to independent artists like Todd ("Welcome to the Dollhouse") Solondz.

New Jersey has developed its own cottage industry of low-budget and video-release features. The horror genre ranks high, and Paterson-born Dante Tomaselli is swiftly establishing itself as one of its signature practitioners. In the centerless world of non-theatrical distribution, he's developed an international name with just two features.

The director has blithely preempted the entire field with the title of his latest DVD release, "Horror" (www.horrorthemovie.com). And he's contracted a series source more inexhaustible than the Tarzan or James Bond books—his dreams.

"All my films come from my childhood nightmares," says the 33-year-old filmmaker who recruited a cult following with 1999's "Desecration." The mix of madness, hallucination, supernatural dread and unnameable presences swirling through "Horror" evokes an order of reality that overlaps and interlocks with the daylight world. "Ambiguity is the essence of the story," Tomaselli says, adding, "If I weren't a filmmaker, I'd have been a parapsychologist."

Working in an area derided for nickel-squeezing exploitation, Tomaselli talks very much like an artist. The one qualifier in the respectful reviews for "Horror" has concerned Tomaselli's preference for macabre atmosphere and suggestive imagery over generic gore.

Among his subliminal models are Nicolas Roeg's chilling "Don't Look Now" and the early films of David Cronenberg. Though often compared to Italian shock stylists like Dario Argento and Mario Bava, the director credits a shared Catholic heritage rather than direct influence.

"I grew up in Montvale, which is more middle class," he says. "But our relatives in Paterson were still surrounded by all that religious iconography. I found all those Mary statues more sinister than soothing."

As a kid in the '70s, Tomaselli celebrated Mass at the movie house. "Every Friday I'd open up The Star-Ledger, and there'd be this wonderful variety of horror films. Today they're treated more like pom."



Dante Tomaselli is the director of the new film "Horror."

The boy's early fascination with the otherworldly caused a schism at home. His late father, highly orthodox, disapproved. Tomaselli credits his mother, a passionate horror fan, with nurturing his imagination.

And how did he repay her? "I cast her as a nun in 'Desecration,'" Tomaselli chuckles. "Which is a weird thing to do to your mom. But she doesn't get killed or anything."

Profits are modest and prestige wobbly in his chosen craft, but the fans are loyal unto death. The Internet has given them a collective voice.

As Tomaselli prepares "Satan's Playground," an attempt to draw serious scares from the Jersey Devil legend, he notes that the "Horror" Web site is "up to about 5,000 hits a day."

During dry times, horror has provided a rare sanctuary for creative imagination in commercial film. Respect often comes late to its creators. But the reputation of directors like Tod ("Dracula") Browning and James ("Frankenstein") Whale, or producers like Val ("Cat People") Lewton, continue to thrive long after their Oscar-winning, brand-name confreres have become unvisited statues.

For a filmmaker, what better proof of life after death?

The ship sails on

"Status quo" may not be the most thrilling command, but at the Roberts Theatres it's a reassuring one. It was theater owner Bob Roberts who kept open New Jersey film lovers' lifeline to the world.

In the mid-1980s, Roberts' Lost Picture Show in Union was the state's last surviving full-time showcase for foreign and independent films. Roberts hand-fed a whole endangered species back to health.

The 74-year-old impresario was running three specialized theaters when he died last year, and his then general manager Gary Heckel concedes that "a lot of people were concerned" about Roberts' labor of love.

"He had a big following," Heckel adds. This impassioned minority audience feared a change of course toward safe commercial havens.

Not to worry. Command passed to the sturdy first mate. Childless widower Roberts bequeathed the mini-chain to Heckel, his general manager of 21 years. The new owner's first mission was "steady the ship."

"I got excited about art films in the mid-'80s at the Lost Picture Show," says Heckel. "We developed a very loyal audience, and it's an audience we know."

Heckel, his managers and "technical" manager son Kevin, "a real movie buff," closely track and evaluate new releases. The transplanted Lost Picture Show in Bloomfield has found its chief audience with "family films." But its siblings can claim vibrant individual identities. The Chatham Cinema caters to "the Merchant-Ivory audience" for serious, prestigious films. "No rough stuff or cultish" movies. The period piece "Nowhere in Africa" and the current "Whale Rider" have had long, successful Chatham runs. Heckel looks forward with undisguised excitement to August's Merchant-Ivory release "Le Divorce."

Quicker, more off-center titles fare better at Montclair's Wellmont triplex, which devotes one screen full-time and another part-time to specialty films. The spelling bee documentary "Spellbound" has "run a month, and we could run it another month."

The seasoned exhibitor knows that what's on screen isn't the whole experience. He and 24-year-old Kevin constantly monitor projection quality and technical details. The once and future Roberts Theatres play "two commercials, maximum" and no "20-minute marathons of previews."

So far, he says, he's found gratifyingly smooth sailing away from the high-friction mercantile shipping lanes.

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movietime
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