

THE BRAIN

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that doesn't al integrity. But it's also a bizarre inci- rformance riffs- ies of parts or the faults

Larkish spirit of the enterprise is contagious. Clearly having the time of their lives are Keach and Raimi. Raimi and co-writer David M. Goodman are Campbell confederates going all the way back to the original "Evil Dead" 25 years ago.

SATAN'S PLAYGROUND

An Em & Me Prods. presentation. Produced by Milka Stanisic, Anthony J. Vorhies. Executive producers, Millie Stanisic, Christa Avery.

Directed, written by Dante Tomaselli. Camera (color), Tim Naylor; editors, Egon Kirincic, Marcus Bonilla; music, Kenneth Lampl, Tomaselli; production designer, J.T. Camp; art director, Peter Zumba; costume designer, Erika Gonzueta; sound, Chen Harpaz; f/x, Scott Sliger; assistant director, Jared Trimble. Reviewed at Another Hole in the Head Film Festival, San Francisco, June 5, 2005. Running time: 81 MIN.

With: Felissa Rose, Ellen Sandweiss, Edwin Neal, Irma St. Paule, Danny Lopes, Christie Sanford, Ron Milkie, Salvatore Paul Piro, Raine Brown, Robert Zappalorti, Marco Peter Ordyk.

By DENNIS HARVEY

The third feature from writer-director Dante Tomaselli, "Satan's Playground" is another richly atmospheric exercise in surreal horror. While more accessible (and commercially viable) than his earlier efforts, pic again flies just close enough to genre convention to confound those anticipating typical narrative logic, phenomena explanations and sexploitation (thesps are mostly 40-plus). Instead, this fatal family outing in the New Jersey Pine Barrens forest suggests familiar "Texas Chainsaw Massacre"-type terrain, but plays more like a Grimm Bros. fairy tale filtered through the dreaming subconscious. Specialized theatrical is possible, though most fans will likely have to wait for DVD release.

After a brief prologue in which a young woman (Raine Brown) left alone on a remote nighttime road falls prey to some unseen aerial menace, the Brunos, a very Noo Joisey clan of loud, argumentative types, is introduced. Sisters Donna (Felissa Rose) and Paula (Ellen Sandweiss) present a haranguing united front against the former's dyspeptic spouse Frank (Salvatore Paul Piro). Also along, albeit mercifully quiet, are the couple's autistic son Sean (Danny Lopes) and newly divorced Paula's infant Anthony (Marko Peter Ordyk).

When their car gets stuck, Frank toddles off for help, ignoring the warnings of his women—who've already taken notice of some ominous



Christie Sanford is featured in horror flick "Satan's Playground."

swooping noises above. Unfortunately, Frank arrives on the most unhelpful doorstep of Mrs. Leeds (Irma St. Paule), an ancient woman whose sugary, senile manner is just icing on a poisonous cake.

She lives in a boarded-up, trashed abode with her two mute but malevolent children: Judy (Christie Sanford), who looks like Pippi Longstocking gone to serious seed, and middle-aged and dangerous "Boy" (Edwin Neal), who doesn't appear until later.

After Frank is indefinitely detained, Donna traipses off after him, then Sean, leaving terrified Paula alone with a baby that is snatched the moment her back is turned.

Tomaselli creates a hyper-real atmosphere of striking primal-fear images, cackling lunacy (Mrs. Leeds is the very picture of Hansel & Gretel's crone captor), impending doom and grotesque humor. One running gag sends up the genre convention in which frightened characters beg a local resident to "use your phone," not realizing they've entered the very den of evil.

Less interested in individual shocks (or gore) than dislocating queasiness, the director achieves impressive overall results comparable to Bava or Argento's more delirious moments. Circling rather than linear narrative sometimes grows too arbitrary or repetitive, however, notably during an epilogue that simply reprises much of what's gone before.

Given deliberately banal dialogue, thesps occasionally seem stilted; protagonists must feign psychological realism in a context that hardly supports it. No surprise that the over-the-top, alarming yet absurd villains fare best by far.

Tomaselli tips his hat to horror geeks by casting cult faves — Rose from "Sleepaway Camp," Sandweiss and Neal from original "Evil Dead" and "Texas Chainsaw Massacre," respectively — while St. Paule, Lopes, Sanford and several others have been in all his own films to date.

Once again belying very modest means, helmer has delivered a design and tech package that's first-rate. Complex music/ambient audio design he composed with Kenneth Lampl is a worthy match to Tim Naylor's beautifully menacing photography, which makes especially gorgeous use of refracted forest light.

Unfortunately, 35mm print wasn't ready for Another Hole in the Head fest, necessitating vid projection whose colors were a poor, washed-out diminution of the rich palette seen on a DVD screener.

DEAD MEAT

(IRELAND)

A Bedford Entertainment release of a Horrorthon production in association with Irish Film Fund and Three Way Prods. Produced by Edward King. Executive producer, Brendan McCarthy. Co-producer, Michael Griffin.

Directed, written, edited by Conor McMahon. Camera (color, DV), Andrew Legge; music, John Gilleoley; production designer, Cornelius Browne; art director, Jay Graham; costume designer, Leonie Pendergast; makeup, Liz Byrne; sound editor, Fiadhnaic McCann; assistant director, Gareth Evans; casting, Three Way. Reviewed at Another Hole in the Head Film Festival, San Francisco, June 6, 2005. MPAA Rating: R. Running time: 80 MIN.

With: Marian Araujo, David Muylaert, Eoin Whelan, Dave Ryan, Amy Redmond, Kathryn Toolan.