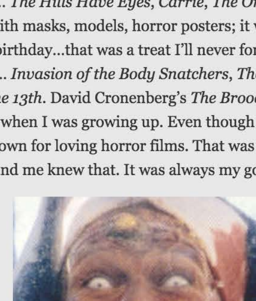
FRIGHT INTERVIEW – DANTE TOMASELLI (WRITER/DIRECTOR SATAN'S PLAYGROUND)

Posted by Rob Galluzzo on Wednesday, October 19, 2011 · 0 Comments

Dante Tomaselli is responsible for some of the most refreshing new horror films out on the market today. Building an underground cult status with his films "DESECRATION", "HORROR", and the upcoming "SATAN'S PLAYGROUND", which stars Felissa Rose, Ellen Sandweiss, and Edwin Neal. Icons Of Fright spoke to him about his experiences so far with previous films, his excitement over his new film, "SATAN'S PLAYGROUND" and what he's got lined up for the future. Visit him at the Satan's Playground website. – by Robg. 4/04

What are your earliest recollections of getting into the horror genre? Are there any particular films that influenced you into following the path of filmmaking?

It was definitely just a natural instinct. But I'm sure there were a lot of outside forces that contributed to it. *Don't Look Now*, *Tourist Trap*...my cousin's film, *Alice, Sweet Alice*. The original *Halloween* had a huge impact. So did *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and *The Evil Dead*. I was three years-old when *The Exorcist* was released...in 1973. Even though I didn't see it at that age, I remember the TV commercials, the newspaper Ads and the creepy cover of the book...the swirling possessed figure. Ahhh the 70s... an amazing time for horror. Luckily, my mother was always into horror films so I got to see everything rated R. In 1976, when I was six, I saw a lot of movies at the Drive-in... *The Hills Have Eyes*, *Carrie*, *The Omen*, *Burnt Offerings*, *The Sentinel*. Meanwhile, I had my room filled with masks, models, horror posters; it was like a funhouse. In 1978, when I was eight I saw *Halloween* on my birthday...that was a treat I'll never forget. It seemed like every week there was something special coming out... *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, *The Fog*, *Alien*, *The Changeling*... 1980 brought *The Shining* and *Friday the 13th*. David Cronenberg's *The Brood* was scary. I was always afraid to put my hands over the sides of the bed when I was growing up. Even though I had a lot of nightmares, I was a horror film addict. I was always known for loving horror films. That was my world. I knew I wanted to be a horror film director, everyone around me knew that. It was always my goal in life.



How difficult is it for an independent horror director these days, to raise money for his projects? How do you it? How do you go about promoting your films when you finish?

You just have to be on a mission. The only way for this to come together is that it has to completely take over your life. It's like you become a slave to the film. And there's nothing else. I made a series of *Desecration* shorts when I was in my twenties. At first none of them would get into film festivals. They were rejected over and over. I could have given up right there but I didn't. Something pushed me on. Finally, I made a version that got into the IFFM (Independent Feature Film Market) at NYC's Angelika Film Center. All of a sudden things opened up and film festivals started saying yes. I hate peddling my work. I'm shy and I don't enjoy speaking in front of crowds. I don't like to sell myself. I'd rather the film speak for itself. I'm more of a musician than your typical director. These films are songs or...albums to me. *Satan's Playground* is my third album. I'm influenced by music just as much as movies. Depeche Mode...a huge influence.

What prompted you to make your first full-length feature, an expanded version of your short film, *'Desecration'*?

My dreams. My nightmares. I first started drawing haunted convents, faceless nuns... then... cages and demon mothers holding baby bottles filled with hallucinogens. The pictures and sounds just needed to come out. I don't know... it's wild... it's like being caught in an ocean riptide, you just go with it.

The first screening of the *'Desecration'* was at Fantafestival in Rome. Can you tell us what that experience was like for you?

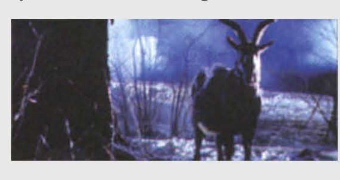
Disturbing... fun... eye-opening. It was everything. Mostly it was an anxiety filled experience. I don't enjoy watching my films with audiences... and it was a standing-room-only crowd! People were sitting in the aisles and standing in the back. I couldn't believe it. I was terrified. I just wanted to disappear.

The scissors scene in *'Desecration'* with sister Rita is quite possibly one of the most disturbing sequences I've ever seen. Where do the ideas for your death sequences come from?

That is a very brutal scene. The idea for that came from an incident that goes back to when I was going to art school... Pratt Institute in Brooklyn; I'd always be carrying a big black portfolio. The same exact one in the film. One time, while on campus, I reached into the portfolio... and inside there was a huge pair of sharp scissors... and I stabbed my finger. It sounds strange, but I vividly heard a growling sound in my imagination at the same time — as if the scissors were alive. A Piggish, demonic growl. I never forgot the moment, the emotion, and it just gelled into that scene when I was writing the script. I should tell you that I actually wrote the *Desecration* scissors sequence while sitting on the steps of The New York Public Library on 42nd street and 5th Ave. I was in a trance watching the people go by. I felt like I was absorbing the emotional violence around me.

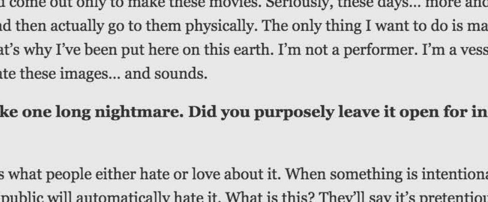
The imagery in your first two films is very surreal and beautifully haunting. It also seems very well thought out. How much time and preparation do you spend before actually shooting a movie? Do you go into a project with a good idea of exactly what you want to see visually?

Yeah, I really do. Visually I can see it as clear as slides projected in my mind. I do a lot of preparation with my cinematographer. We storyboarded Satan's Playground....the whole film more or less, though actually once I get on set, I rarely ever look at the storyboards — my mind's eye knows more. Between the script supervisor, assistant director, and art department — there forms a little nerve-net, an energy ball...they all help me create my visuals. Filmmaking is definitely a group effort. Obviously I could never do this alone. I need lots of people... totally devoted...on set I feel like Dracula.



Speaking of visuals, the locations, especially in *'Desecration'* are quite creepy. Where'd you film those first two features and how'd you find those locations?

Well, lots of areas where I shot in *Desecration* were sections where I grew up, where I spent my childhood. Places like Paterson. It's all New Jersey. It's funny because some critics remark how it looks like Europe, the terrain, the landscape...but it's just plain old Jersey. The locations for Horror were mostly upstate New York, where there are lots of rolling hills and infinite horizons. An interesting guy named Henry Pfieffer gave me a tour of Warwick and I ended up falling in love with the rural, Salem witch-trial-like area. It just screamed, "document me!"



You had screened a 5-minute trailer for *'HORROR'* along with some footage from *'Desecration'* at a Fangoria Weekend Of Horrors convention in NY a few years back, which got very positive audience response. (My friends & I were among those awed!) As a fan *and* a filmmaker, what's the convention experience like for you?

Thanks. I don't like crowds so I don't really enjoy the convention experience. Makes me feel kinda paranoid and nauseous. Yeah... I remember the screening you're talking about at the Ramada Inn. I'm not sure if I'll ever shake this, I don't know... I truly feel uncomfortable at Festivals where I have to present my work. I don't have a showman-like personality. I just want to retreat into my imagination. That's where I want to be all the time. I could live in a cell and come out only to make these movies. Seriously, these days... more and more, I'd rather visit places in my mind then actually go to them physically. The only thing I want to do is make these horror movies. I have to. That's why I've been put here on this earth. I'm not a performer. I'm a vessel. I have this compulsion to translate these images... and sounds.

***'HORROR'* plays like one long nightmare. Did you purposely leave it open for individual interpretation?**

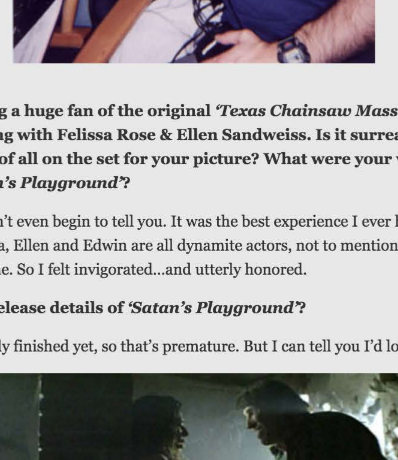
Absolutely. And that's what people either hate or love about it. When something is intentionally ambiguous — a certain section of the public will automatically hate it. What is this? They'll say it's pretentious. Oh that movie was awful — it made no sense. I was reading some customer reviews for *Mulholland Drive* and I couldn't believe some of the comments. This is the worst movie I've ever seen in my entire life, blah, blah. And yet, wasn't David Lynch nominated for best director for that film? Where's all this intense anger, this hatred coming from? What you don't understand, you hate. Now I am in no way comparing myself to Lynch... he's a seasoned, accomplished director. I'm a cult horror entity... but I purposely designed *HORROR* like an open-ended puzzle. It's a nightmare. It's gotten me some of my best reviews and some of my worst. I absolutely never know what to expect when I read a review for *HORROR*... It definitely divides audiences right down the middle. Love or hate.

The *'HORROR'* DVD is a great special edition disc. How'd you come to work with Elite entertainment on it?

Thanks. Well, when the film was finished, I just sent a copy out to the president of Elite. He was receptive and enthusiastic. The company that made HORROR, LD Media Corp.... struck a deal and the DVD came out like six months later. It's been a pleasurable experience working with Elite. I'm glad you enjoyed the DVD.

How does *'Satan's Playground'* differ from *'Desecration'* & *'HORROR'*? Any differences on how you approached making this film?

I approached it like I was trying to entertain two entities. Myself and an audience. With *Desecration* & *HORROR*, I only thought of myself. This one...aside from being more accessible is way way scarier. *Satan's Playground* has an easy-to-understand plot-line, whereas my last two films were non linear...to the extreme.

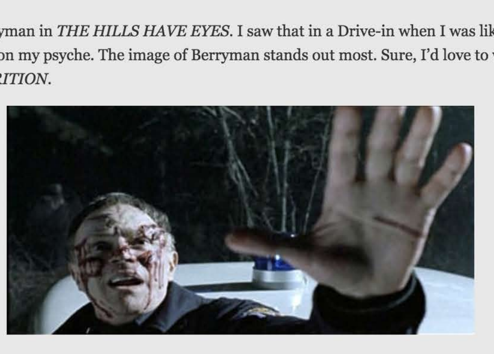


You've admitted to being a huge fan of the original *'Texas Chainsaw Massacre'*, and now Edwin Neal is in your cast, along with Felissa Rose & Ellen Sandweiss. Is it surreal for you to see these actors you've been fans of all on the set for your picture? What were your working experiences with them like on *'Satan's Playground'*?

Oh God I was so happy I can't even begin to tell you. It was the best experience I ever had working with performers on a film. Felissa, Ellen and Edwin are all dynamite actors, not to mention horror icons. It was a dream-come-true cast for me. So I felt invigorated...and utterly honored.

Any early word on the release details of *'Satan's Playground'*?

Well, it's not even completely finished yet, so that's premature. But I can tell you I'd love a Halloween release.

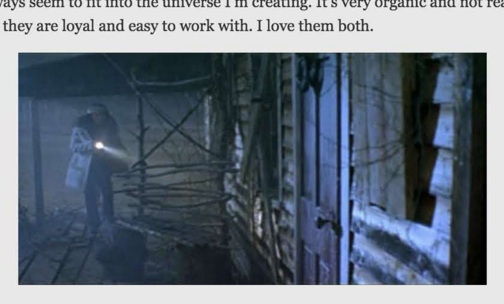


Michael Berryman was originally attached to *'Satan's Playground'* before a scheduling conflict forced him to pull out. Were you a big fan of his before his initial involvement? And considering the mutual admiration between you two, any plans to try to work together in the future at some point?

I loved Michael Berryman in *THE HILLS HAVE EYES*. I saw that in a Drive-in when I was like 8. That movie is forever emblazoned on my psyche. The image of Berryman stands out most. Sure, I'd love to work with him on my next film, *APPARITION*.

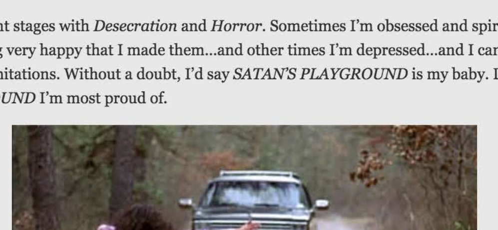
Any other actors you'd like to work with in the future?

The little girl from the *Brood*. She's all grown up now. Let's see...Jamie Lee Curtis, Jessica Harper, Marilyn Burns, Brooke Adams, Angelina Jolie, Veronica Cartright, Fiona Apple, Margot Kidder. The lady who was in *Play Misty For Me*... Jessica Walters. Um...Debbie Harry, Karen Black, Richard Lynch, Jeff Goldblum, Jack Nicholson, Robert DeNiro... I could go on... there are tons...



Danny Lopes and Christie Sanford appear in all your films. Can you tell us about your working relationships with these actors and why you use them for each film? Do you think of them when writing newer projects?

So far, they just always seem to fit into the universe I'm creating. It's very organic and not really planned... Of course it helps that they are loyal and easy to work with. I love them both.

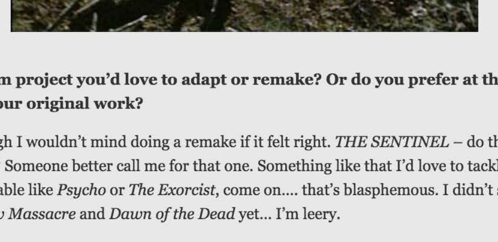


Out of your three movies, is there any particular one you're the most proud or pleased with overall? Or are they all kind of your "babies"?

I go through different stages with *Desecration* and *Horror*. Sometimes I'm obsessed and spiritually connected to them...and feeling very happy that I made them...and other times I'm depressed...and I can only see their flaws and budget limitations. Without a doubt, I'd say *SATAN'S PLAYGROUND* is my baby. Definitely. *SATAN'S PLAYGROUND* I'm most proud of.

What's a typical day like on a Dante Tomaselli set?

Lots of hard working crew members constructing weird, nightmarish sets. Lots of screaming and heavy breathing. Hmmm... me — drinking hot chocolate. On *Satan's Playground* there was a lot of crying... more so than any of my movies. Felissa and Ellen really got into their roles, to say the least.

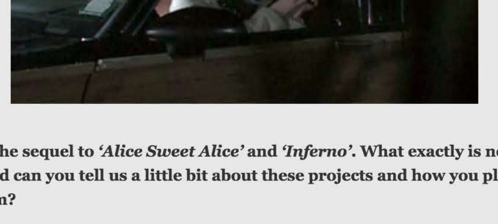


Is there any dream project you'd love to adapt or remake? Or do you prefer at this point to concentrate on your original work?

Original work, though I wouldn't mind doing a remake if it felt right. *THE SENTINEL* – do they have a director attached to that yet? Someone better call me for that one. Something like that I'd love to tackle. But something classic and untouchable like *Psycho* or *The Exorcist*, come on.... that's blasphemous. I didn't see the remakes of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and *Dawn of the Dead* yet... I'm leery.

With all these redux/remake films, what's your take on the current state of the horror genre?

Desperate. True horror fans are still not satisfied. We're still waiting for a hard-core horror movie to blow us away.



You're linked to the sequel to *'Alice Sweet Alice'* and *'Inferno'*. What exactly is next on your directing slate and can you tell us a little bit about these projects and how you plan on approaching them?

Alice, Sweet Alice 2 will eventually come... but my next film after *SATAN'S PLAYGROUND* will probably be *APPARITION*. It's a twisted ghost story. I don't want to give away too much, but *APPARITION* centers on a haunted section of the ocean... There are supernatural riptides... And a mystery at the film's core. Felissa Rose will play a church organist who loses her husband and son in a violent drowning. She inherits an Old Victorian house overlooking the ocean. Think *JAWS* meets *THE ENTITY* meets *THE AMITYVILLE HORROR*. It'll be very atmospheric, very old-school. But honestly at this point all I can think of is *SATAN'S PLAYGROUND*... and making it the best it can be. I'm not finished editing it yet.

Since you're a zombie fan, and we ask this of all our zombie fans: Fast zombies or slow zombies?

Slow, shuffling zombies are more effective, as if they're bidding their time, something like *TOMBS OF THE BLIND DEAD*. Creepy!

Last but not least ... you had said in another interview that you would love to one day make a zombie film (expanding upon the zombie sequence seen in *'HORROR'*). If and when you do it ... can we, the staff of Icons Of Fright be zombies in it?

Definitely. I have always planned on making a full-fledged zombie splatter movie. There's no doubt... it'll be coming....

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