

## Fango Flashback: “THE SENTINEL”

Written by Tim Janson

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THE EXORCIST spawned dozens of films dealing with devils, demons or Satanic cults in the 1970s, and one of the best but most underappreciated of those films was 1977’s THE SENTINEL. Directed by DEATH WISH’s Michael Winner, it opens with a young model, Alison Parker (Cristina Raines), moving into an old New York brownstone apartment whose only other tenant is a blind priest (John Carradine) who spends his days staring out his window.



Not long after moving in, Alison begins experiencing strange phenomena—weird sounds coming from the supposedly empty apartment above, physical illness and dreams that flash back to her traumatic failed suicide attempt. It appears as if the building isn’t quite as uninhabited as she believed, as Alison meets several bizarre neighbors. Her boyfriend (Chris Sarandon) assures her everything is OK...just enough for you to know he’s up to no good.

Alison finds out that she didn’t choose the apartment as much as it chose her. The apartment is in reality a gateway to hell, and the blind priest is the guardian who keeps the demons from escaping. But his time as Sentinel has come to an end and a new successor must be found, and it has to be a person who has attempted suicide—Alison! The other residents turn out to be demons that can only stop Alison by driving her to take her own life. The story climaxes in a march through hell itself for Alison’s life and soul.

THE SENTINEL sparked controversy for its use of people with genuine physical deformities, rather than relying on makeup alone. While this approach may have been exploitative, it undeniably results in powerful, lingering images. The film features one of the great jump-out-of-your-seat moments in horror-movie history when Alison goes exploring the noises coming from another part of the house; in fact, this scene made Bravo’s list of THE 100 Scariest Movie Moments.

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What sets THE SENTINEL apart from so many other films of its ilk is its outstanding supporting cast that features several veteran and up-and-coming actors, including Carradine, Ava Gardner, Burgess Meredith, Sylvia Miles, Jose Ferrer, Eli Wallach, Jerry Orbach, Christopher Walken, Jeff Goldblum and Beverly D'Angelo (who provides one of the more memorable scenes). The weakest link in the cast is actually its female lead, Raines. In her mid-20s at the time, she didn't have the chops to pull off what should have been a stronger female lead. This was at the height of the Women's Liberation movement; Alison is independent, earning her own living and wanting her own apartment, but Raines plays the role too timidly. Fortunately, the fine supporting ensemble helps carry her, including Meredith, who plays another seemingly amiable tenant who hides his true malevolence.

THE SENTINEL shows its age in its fashions and styles of the day, especially the '70s-porn-star mustaches on many of the male characters, but its genuine chills and heart-thumping atmosphere have lost none of their potency. While it's not in the same class as the best devil-themed films of the era, it's certainly better than most with its terrifying imagery and superb cast.



{comments on}