

Fango Flashback: “TAXI DRIVER”

Written by Tony Timpone

Thursday, 17 March 2011 10:39



Fango editorial chief Chris Alexander makes a case for Darren Aronofsky’s *THE WRESTLER* being a horror film (see *Last Rites*, Fango #299), but it’s a somewhat easier task for me to give that same distinction to Martin Scorsese’s equally brilliant 1976 classic *TAXI DRIVER*. The movie begins a special two-week engagement (with a gorgeous new 35mm print, digitally restored) at New York City’s [Film Forum](#) (209 West Houston; [212] 727-8110) this Friday and runs through March 31.

Scorsese himself has described *TAXI DRIVER* as a “mix of gothic horror and tabloid news,” and the film has seared itself into our cinematic consciousness—helped along by the actions of a certain John Hinckley Jr. (more on that later). In one of his most iconic roles, Robert De Niro stars as the titular Travis Bickle, an alienated loner who prowls the streets of a positively hellish New York City (*TAXI DRIVER* represents a perfect time capsule of ’70s-era Times Square) in his grungy cab/chariot. He’s hired by no less than the Maniac himself, actor Joe Spinell, in the film’s opening moments, and like Spinell’s Frank Zito, the guy’s ready to explode. But Travis’ issues run much deeper than Zito’s mother issues; the guy doesn’t have a clue on how to relate to people beyond the surface, and it’s remarkable that he’s able to tentatively charm a pretty campaign worker (vision in white Cybill Shepherd as Betsy, attracted to bad boys and not the office nerds) into a first date. Said romantic interlude ends badly when Bickle takes the woman to a 42nd Street skin flick (his primary entertainment on insomniac sojourns), and when Betsy rebuffs him, Bickle goes off the deep end and sets his sights on a presidential candidate (Betsy’s boss). He’s a loaded gun who needs a release, not unlike the steamy manhole covers we see in the film, which takes place during a summer heat wave. But this human pressure cooker finds a new mission when he meets a 12-year-old hooker named Iris (Jodie Foster) and turns white knight to free her and get rid of his mounting urban stress. Scorsese reportedly drew inspiration from *THE WILD BUNCH*’s blood-drenched climactic reels for his own finger-mangling, splatter-filled finale, with gore gags orchestrated by no less than *THE EXORCIST*’s Dick Smith, who worried that his director had gone too far (ace DP Michael Chapman desaturated the red in the scene to appease the MPAA). Want more trivia?



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De Niro ad-libbed the classic "You talkin' to me?" monologue... Screenwriter Paul Schrader based Travis Bickle on his own life—including bouts of alienation, sleeplessness, alcoholism and porno-theater trolling while living in LA, not to mention a chance meeting with an actual underage hooker—as well as the true-life diaries of crackpot Arthur Bremer, would-be assassin of presidential candidate George Wallace... At one point, studio Columbia Pictures considered THE OTHER's Robert Mulligan to direct and TRON's Jeff Bridges as star (!)... TAXI DRIVER cost a paltry \$1.9 million to produce, and though the movie went slightly over budget, the studio left Scorsese and company alone, as they were working for peanuts anyway... De Niro wore Schrader's own clothes in the film, including his shirt, boots and belt... Of course, TAXI DRIVER's lasting trivia footnote came courtesy of actual nutjob Hinckley, who shot President Ronald Reagan in 1981 to win actress Foster's affections.

Besides Bernard Herrmann's brooding score (which has hints of one of his PSYCHO themes if you listen closely) and the portrait of one of the screen's most disturbed individuals (tell me you've never met someone just like Travis Bickle during your life?), why would I call TAXI DRIVER a horror film? A few critics much more esteemed than myself offer the following:

The New York Times' Vincent Canby, who took issue with TAXI DRIVER's oddly redemptive ending (or is it?), set the film's tone in his original review on February 8, 1976: "The steam billowing up around the manhole covers in the street is a dead giveaway. Manhattan is a thin cement lid over the entrance to hell, and the lid is full of cracks."



An early supporter of Schrader's critical writing, LA's Pauline Kael noted back in the day (in a review collected in her FOR KEEPS book): "The street vapors become ghostly; Sport the pimp romancing his baby whore leads her in a hypnotic dance; the porno theaters are like mortuaries; the congested traffic is macabre. And this Hell is always in movement."

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The prize-winning Kael adds: "The fact that we experience Travis's need for an explosion viscerally, and that the explosion itself has the quality of consummation, makes TAXI DRIVER one of the few truly modern horror films."

Horror or not, you owe it to yourself to catch TAXI DRIVER on the big screen during the picture's 35th anniversary repertory run. This is one ride worth taking.

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