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As a man who is so claustrophobic I get panic attacks in a tight shirt, the idea of being trapped in a prison sounds like a living hell of a nightmare wrapped in a miserable experience. Now add a couple hundred remorseless psychopathic killers running about unrestrained, and you’ve got yourself a super-phobia. You also have the ground work for a great movie premise, and the plot behind ASYLUM BLACKOUT (now available on VOD via IFC Films).

George (HELLBOY’s Rupert Evans), a cook in a mental institution, works alongside his bandmates Max (Kenny Doughty), Ricky (Joseph Kennedy) and William (Marcus Garvey). While they’re working the night shift during a storm, the power goes out, as it will inevitably do in such a situation. The cell doors open (apparently they were only kept locked electrically), releasing their nut-cluster centers. Now, with no backup generator and no functioning locks, the inmates run amok all over the asylum. As you can probably predict, the resulting activity ain’t going to be pretty.

Even with such an obvious turn of events, ASYLUM BLACKOUT (a U.S./French/Belgian coproduction originally titled THE INCIDENT) has a promising premise. Unfortunately, the pace is too unbearably slow to capitalize on such a capable concept. The film starts out extremely draggy, builds slightly, then just levels off before becoming repetitive. Instead of utilizing its

great idea to its fullest potential, ASYLUM BLACKOUT substitutes action with needless and stale backstory. The entire first half is dedicated to developing characters who could have easily been established within the first 10 minutes. After this lengthy, unnecessary history, ASYLUM BACKOUT becomes a slowed-down zombie film with lunatics—which also fails to truly utilize the asylum backdrop to its absolute potential.

The kills we see are quite gruesome, and respect must be paid to the impressive use of practical FX; unfortunately, half of the really good action happens off-camera. I did enjoy a couple of comedic moments, but the use of the “Wilhelm Scream,” inserted where it clearly doesn’t belong, insults the audience and ruins what little credibility the film possesses. There are no issues with any of the actors, who brood endlessly in the way they were no doubt directed to. The problem lies in the execution of the story, and the failure to push boundaries in a film where it was sorely needed.

This film did teach me two very important lessons:

1. Never work as a cook in any asylum that doesn’t have a backup generator.

2. If you are trapped in this situation, just act like a crazy person. They don’t seem to attack their own kind.