

"NIGHTBREED: THE CABAL CUT" (Movie Review)

Written by Trevor Parker
Monday, 23 July 2012 09:12



Stop us if you've heard this one before: Young director (usually European) has an audacious debut feature that has fans and critics buzzing. Said director is then tempted into working with a big Hollywood studio, and once he exhibits the same risky daring for which he was presumably hired, the studio's timid money men bow to test screenings and drain the product until it's a safe, bland porridge. Such was the case with Clive Barker, whose second film NIGHTBREED (1990) was hobbled by backers Morgan Creek and Fox.

The ambitious film was pretty well doomed once more than an hour's worth of running time was gutted out, and the remainder shipped to theatres mismarketed as a simple slasher flick instead of the horror fan's STAR WARS that Barker had planned to make. Twenty-two years later, as several diligent archivists have worked to repair Barker's vision by recovering hours of raw footage assumed to have been junked ages ago, can a new and drastically expanded CABAL CUT bring the Nightbreed back to life?

NIGHTBREED: THE CABAL CUT tells the story of Aaron Boone (Craig Sheffer), a young man stricken by intense dreams of an underground city called Midian. Midian is understood to be a mythical locale which serves as a haven to all manner of supernatural freaks. Boone is eventually framed by his therapist Doctor Decker (David Cronenberg) for a series of domestic slayings for which the Doctor himself is responsible. While on the run, a chance encounter with the manic Narcisse (Hugh Ross) has Boone convinced that Midian is real, and he's soon off to uncover the hidden city and claim his monstrous destiny. Both Boone's devoted girlfriend Lori (Anne Bobby) and Doctor Decker pursue Boone to Midian; one trying to coax him back to his human existence, the other wanting to put an end to him once and for all...

Without a doubt, NIGHTBREED: THE CABAL CUT is a richer, broader, gorier experience than the 1990 version. Characters gain more flesh and are often taken on altogether different angles than in the compromised cut. Serious BREED fans will feel rewarded for their faith and patience by these elaborations. Nevertheless, CABAL falls short of being the revelation everyone else hoped it might be; it's a mansion, huge and sprawling, but built on the same cracked foundation as the original dwelling. The flaws in the story remain, and NIGHTBREED's worst aspect—the silly, chaotic third act—is made even worse by the additions. The clownish

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cops and hooting, flannel-swathed posse that litter the climax as stand-ins for FRANKENSTEIN's cluster of pitchfork-and-torch toting villagers are now even more painfully over-the-top. And prepare to be astounded all over again as a hick police department from a Canadian backwater turns out to be better armed than Seal Team Six, wreaking havoc with flamethrowers and grenade launchers.

{youtube}CX0-AlytIXY{/youtube}

CABAL's many new tangents are interesting, and although Barker intended that his 1990 release be of comparable heft (CABAL runs over two and a half hours), a real problem here is that not everything salvageable should have been spliced back into the movie proper. Lori's musical number and anything with Malcolm Smith's terrible performance as a drunken town priest are just two examples that bloat this version and would be better off presented as DVD extras. The heavy-handed 'must we destroy all that is different?' theme is now flung at the audience with even less subtlety ("That thing... was just too weird to live," one character rationalizes after the messy murder of probably the most normal-looking of the Nightbreed), and the amended ending is still less a satisfying resolution to the story and more a brazen lead-in to a sequel that never came.

Watching CABAL does mark a good opportunity to appreciate the finer aspects of NIGHTBREED, of which there are quite a few. Prepare to drool during lengthier time spent with the film's fantastically designed and highly imaginative creatures, most of whom could likely carry their own solo movie (love that nasty porcupine girl). The professorial David Cronenberg's calm underplaying of sicko Doctor Decker is marvellously unsettling (and try to count how many times the look of Decker's awesome button-eyed killing mask has been ripped off in the years since...) Also enjoyable is more of Hugh Ross's sly comic relief as Boone's sponsor into Midian. Please note: the score by Danny Elfman is an underrated powerhouse and probably his best non-Burton music, chock-full of booming bombast, tribal rhythms, and spooky, swirling kiddie-chorales.

The passion, care and respect that have gone into compiling the CABAL cut from three different sources of varying quality are well apparent and trump some understandably ragged editing, unfinished sound, and occasionally murky VHS visuals. It's impossible not to salute the sheer accomplishment of it all. Still, CABAL turns out not to be some suppressed slice of genius that was gagged, bagged and tossed off a bridge by callous studio heads, but is best regarded as a cinematic curio similar to Paul Schrader's rejected EXORCIST prequel (another fumble by the folks at Morgan Creek). This means CABAL is really no more than a decent watch, but it's a blessing that it even exists. At the very least, let's all be happy that the

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Nightbreed are once again seeing the light of day.

