There isn’t much in the demonic-possession subgenre that screams “comedic potential,” and the few past attempts (SCARY MOVIE 2 and Linda Blair’s painfully moronic EXORCIST spoof REPOSSESSED come to mind) to try and find the funny in somber old Catholic rituals bears this out. So it’s a relief, and a credit to writer/director J.T. Petty’s skewed sensibilities, that he’s able to drag some very dark laughs out of this difficult premise with his new 3D film HELLBENDERS.

Larry (Clifton Collins Jr.) is a member of the Interfaith Order of Hellbound Saints (Brooklyn Parish), a nondenominational team of clergy who specialize in performing violent and very loud exorcisms. The Saints, led by Father Angus (Clancy Brown), operate under a questionable celestial mathematic that has them sinning as much and as often as possible—so that in the event that they themselves become infested by a demon, they are to commit suicide and the demon will be forced to piggyback on their tainted soul’s trip down to hell. And sin they do: drink, drugs, deviant sexual acts and a constant symphony of creative swearing.

The Saints must call upon all the grace they can muster once one of their own inadvertently releases an ancient Nordic God bent on destroying the world in a blaze of hellfire. Larry and the

Saints must defeat the demon, along with an interfering church hierarchy, so that they can get back to drinking straight whiskey and lusting after fellow Saint Elizabeth (Robyn Rikoon) as soon as possible.

Petty’s first feature since his horror-Western mashup THE BURROWERS, HELLBENDERS runs with a similarly rough-hewn gang; call them Cowboys of the Cassock. Highly irreverent and boldly blasphemous (there were several walkouts at the screening this reviewer attended), the Saints will best appeal to an audience with an acerbic sense of humor; if FAMILY GUY or SOUTH PARK’s raunch fails to make you blink, you’ll be good to go. It helps that the likable cast have the necessary comedic chops to sell their reprehensible characters, with Collins convincingly fluctuating between hilariously cocky and dramatically grim. Dan Fogler of BALLS OF FURY is welcome but underused, THE WIRE’s Andre Royo is excellent as the nervous cataloguer of all the Saints’ transgressions, but HELLBENDERS is the property of the one and only Clancy Brown. Like Ron Perlman or Michael Ironside, Brown is one of those mighty cinema Atlases: an actor able to shoulder entire movies and lift them higher than they sometimes deserve, through screen presence, charisma and a Richter-scale rumble of a voice. His Father Angus is a foul-mouthed, switchblade-popping career high.

This being said, HELLBENDERS is a case of the setup being better than the punchline. The “demon on the loose and trying to open a portal to hell” plotline is beyond tired, and things would have been much more entertaining if Petty simply had the Saints sit in their shabby apartment and play off each other for the duration. The hell-on-Earth plot is also where HELLBENDERS demonstrates its budgetary deficiencies; Petty has to settle for depicting the gathering winds of apocalypse via a few shaky-cam snippets of random possessions (clips sourced through an Internet contest). During the climatic confrontation, shot in a meadow in which the actors are surrounded by pillars of unconvincing digital flames, one can almost hear the moths fluttering out of the producers’ empty billfolds. And the 3D aspect adds zilch to this dialogue-heavy film; see it in 2D if possible.

Limited by very standard plotting and a budget not up to ambitions, HELLBENDERS gets a pass due to Petty pulling off a challenging premise and getting the sacrilegious best out of his crackling cast. Feel free to see it and laugh; just remember to ask your particular deity for forgiveness before you exit the theater.