"SLEDGEHAMMER" (DVD Review)

Written by Michael Gingold Wednesday, 11 May 2011 11:41



It didn't occur to me, when Intervision's DVD of SLEDGEHAMMER was first announced for release this week, that there was specific timing involved. But while I was watching the disc, it suddenly, er, hit me: It's coming out to capitalize on the release of another movie in which the lead character wields a mighty hammer!

Beyond that, of course, there's no comparison between the two flicks. One of the first indie horror features to be shot on video (whether it was the very first is open to debate, including by the participants in this edition), SLEDGEHAMMER is about as cheap as movies get—and, at many points, as slow too. It's not a promising start when the opening establishing shot of a farmhouse lasts about five times longer than it has to, and if all the movie's overextended takes were cut and its unnecessary slow-motion played in real time (and an equally unnecessary flashback reprising a scene in slo-mo *again* was excised), it's likely SLEDGEHAMMER would run less than an hour.



The story concocted by first-time writer/director David A. Prior begins with an adulterous couple, getting it on after the woman has locked her young son in a closet, being brutally slain, with the guy receiving a head-bashing with the titular implement that stands, by default, as the movie's best special effect. Years later, a group of hard-partying friends (led by Prior's often

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shirtless brother Ted, who went on to be a *Playgirl* Man of the Month) arrive at the scene of the crime and are themselves sequentially dispatched by a towering dude wielding that same hammer. But is the killer (and his weapon) real, or a ghost? And if it's the latter, how does a spectral tool cause the physical damage it does?

The fact that writer/director Prior never concretely defines his menace gives the movie a touch of—likely unintended—surreal nightmare logic that has won SLEDGEHAMMER some admirers among fans of grassroots genre cinema. I'm a devotee of such movies too, but the appeal of this one eludes me; lacking even a rudimentary sense of style, it's also missing the go-for-broke insanity that can make something like BOARDINGHOUSE entertaining in spite of itself. Of course, it probably plays better in a room fully stocked with friends and beer, with the potential for any number of drinking games. The fullscreen transfer looks no better than it has to, or probably could under the circumstances, though the audio is pretty sharp; before the movie begins, Intervision "recommends increasing the bass frequencies and overall volume of your home sound system," the better for the grating synthesizer score to assault you with full force.

A number of the aforementioned HAMMER-heads contributed to the DVD, starting with "superfan" Clint Kelley, who moderates a commentary by filmmaker Prior. And let's just say, methinks Kelley doth overpraise too much, as he gushes over the "great claustrophobic feel" and "great character development," and calls Ted Prior's performance and the edits in a fundamental stalk-and-kill scene "absolutely amazing." There's something kind of charming about all this enthusiasm, though, especially as it's interspersed with such malopropisms as Kelley referring to the cast's "maneurisms" and asking Prior if there was any "improvision" during shooting. For his part, Prior doesn't sound entirely convinced about the classic status Kelley tries to confer upon his first screen effort (from which he went on, rather improbably, to have a busy career in 35mm features). Instead, he admits that he did indeed employ all that slo-mo to boost the runtime to feature length, and that all the "farmhouse" interiors were lensed at this apartment (with fake doors applied to a hallway's walls for several shots), while dropping odd factoids, like the fact that DP Salim Kimaz was an extra in the original HALLOWEEN.

A second track has Joseph A. Ziemba and Dan Budnik, curators of the VHS-horror-appreciation website Bleedingskull.com, expressing a more reasoned appreciation of SLEDGEHAMMER's "merits." Asserting that they're not interested in trivia-oriented commentaries, they instead gleefully catalog the movie's absurdities, dissect the onscreen relationships and try to figure out the house geography, while offering background on their site and their histories of tape collecting, to which this writer—and no doubt anyone who'd purchase this disc—can very much relate.

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The extras also include a brief on-camera interview with Prior, which doesn't cover anything not also addressed in the commentary, though he says here that most of the actors were friends, when he states otherwise on that track. Finally, retrospective programmers have their say via a pair of featurettes: In "Hammertime," the Alamo Drafthouse's Zack Carlson makes a case for SLEDGEHAMMER's uniqueness among shot-on-tape horror, which "SLEDGEHAMMERland" has CineFamily's Hadrian Belove and Tom Fitzgerald recalling their staging of the movie's only—and trippy-sounding—theatrical screening.

MOVIE: 8 8 8 8

DVD PACKAGE: ***

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