

“CHOP” (DVD Review)

Written by John Humphrey
Thursday, 02 February 2012 12:21



An eye for an eye, treat others as you wish to be treated, “Karma is a motherf**ker...” All lessons that Lance Reed learns the hard way from a homicidal stranger with an ax (among other things) to grind in CHOP, now on DVD from Vivendi Entertainment.

CHOP starts out in familiar territory: Lance (TROMEEO & JULIET’s Will Keenan, credited here as Billy Bakshi) finds himself stranded when his car breaks down in a semi-remote location with no cell service and no one around for miles. That is, until he is able to flag down a passing truck whose driver is kind enough to offer him a ride back to the city. After some small talk and a few awkward moments with a man billed only as “The Stranger” (Timothy Muskatell), Lance meets the business end of a tranquilizer gun, and from there, the film wastes no time in getting straight to the point.



Next thing we know, we’re in a warehouse with a shaking Lance, who is being forced by the Stranger—out for revenge on him for a prior injustice Lance fails to remember—to either drive an ax into his own half-brother’s face or listen to his wife die a grisly death over the Stranger’s phone. Lance makes the choice, swing goes the ax, and so begins CHOP. It’s a hell of an opener.

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From here, the Stranger makes Lance a simple deal: He's to go home, kiss his wife, tell her he loves her and speak not a word about the affair she'd been having with Lance's (now deceased) brother—and if Lance breaks the deal, he's in for a world of trouble. Of course, Lance lasts all of three weeks before the knowledge of his wife's affair begins to fester, and he starts dropping snide, suspicious comments. Naturally, the Stranger calls their little deal off, and so the trouble begins...again. What follows is a cat-and-mouse game between Lance and the Stranger as Lance struggles to figure out who this guy is, what he did to make him so angry and why he keeps waking up with fewer and fewer extremities.

Horror/comedy is generally a tough nut to crack (or hack up with an ax, as the case may be). It requires a delicate balance that many films attempt, but many have trouble actually nailing. Aside from having a good script, a successful movie of this type needs to be taken seriously by the people involved so as not to come off jokey or insincere. It never works when you have a bunch of actors looking at the camera going, “Can you believe this?! Isn't this all just absurd?!” We know it's absurd, and part of the fun is watching characters deal with it as part of their reality. Committing to it, and allowing the characters to believe it, is key to any good horror/comedy (and good comedy in general), and this is something CHOP does rather well. Which isn't to say the film isn't over-the-top; it has a heightened tone and a certain degree of self-awareness, but given the circumstances, you believe it. The movie sets up the rules of its universe and sticks to them, and that's what's important.

CHOP possesses its own blend of dark, quirky humor and revenge-thriller tropes à la films like OLDBOY and FARGO, mixed with just a hint of SAW-esque torture morality. The characters are painted with varying degrees of twisted, colorful sliminess, and the cast definitely seem to be enjoying themselves. Pretty much everyone involved is screwed up in some way, especially Lance, who seems like a good enough guy at the start, but is revealed to have a nasty little history of his own. It's a lot of fun to watch him and the Stranger play off each other, forming a twisted little bond as Lance spouts off about past injustices, trying to put a finger (or rather, one of his remaining thumbs) on where exactly he knows this Stranger from. After seeing the two pitted against two deadpan cops (one of whom you may recognize as Adam Minarovich, who played Carol's abusive husband Ed on THE WALKING DEAD and also wrote this film), a jilted lesbian prostitute, a drug-dealing redneck amputee and a huge, ZZ-Top-bearded, biker-jacket-wearing bear with a penchant for cherry Chap Stick, Conrad Bain, and something called “stumpin',” you truly get the sense that Lance and the Stranger have been through a lot together. It's kind of touching, in a sick way.

Beyond the colorful cast of characters, CHOP benefits greatly from Minarovich's tight, clever script and some sharp direction from feature first-timer Trent Haaga (you can sense Haaga's roots as an actor in the Troma camp without this feeling like a Troma film). It's a movie that plays its hand without any reservations, copouts, or punches pulled, knowing just when to

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show us the money shots and when to leave you with the impact rather than the gore itself. It also manages to keep you laughing without dulling the suspense by allowing you get too comfortable. Haaga often manages to transcend his budget restrictions, skillfully navigating through moments of humor, suspense, gore, seat-squirming creepiness and even drama, and keeps it all fast-paced without feeling like it's rushing through the brief 84-minute running time. CHOP also benefits from Matthew Olivo's score, which ranges from acoustic instrumentation to slick electronica to suspenseful synth tones to a couple of bad-ass climactic guitar pieces.

Also, just as a sidebar, it's interesting that Lance's wife Emily is played by an Indian actress (Tanisha Mukherjee), a fact that the film calls no direct attention to. Lance and Emily are an interracial couple, and it's nice to see filmmakers willing to make a choice like that without feeling the need to turn it into a specific plot point or a one-off piece of dialogue. So, bonus points for being progressive.

Nonetheless, CHOP is not a perfect film. While most of the dialogue is fun and clever, every now and again there are clunky lines that just serve to get basic points across. The cinematography, as presented in the DVD's 1.78:1 transfer ranges from smooth and polished to overexposed and blown out, especially in some of the daytime exteriors. The editing is occasionally choppy (no pun intended, I swear), as are some of the levels on the Dolby Digital sound mix, and a couple of minor FX shots come off looking subpar in comparison to the more elaborate gags, which look great. There are also a couple of superimposed sequences that could come across as confusing if you're not paying close enough attention. None of these detract significantly from the film as a whole, but they're worth noting.

As far as special features go, CHOP is pretty sparse; all we get are an amusing gag reel and two deleted/extended scenes. It's pretty apparent why these were altered, as they're not entirely necessary; however, the second one does serve to clarify a potentially confusing superimposed bit involving Lance's mother. It makes sense why they altered it for the final cut, as the scene is a little too much in its raw form, but it's still here for your viewing pleasure.

All in all, CHOP is a blast of a pitch-black, low-budget horror/comedy, and definitely one to be enjoyed with plenty of good company (though it had me laughing out loud from start to finish just watching it by myself). It should also hold up over repeat viewings for the sheer amount of fun little details and double meanings you can catch, once you've seen the whole story play out in full.

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