

“THE ORPHAN KILLER” (Film Review)

Written by Jack Bennett

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THE ORPHAN KILLER is one of those slasher movies that puts so much effort into being a legitimately produced feature that it forgets to bring anything else to the table. Playing out like a HALLOWEEN sequel with Catholic baggage, it follows pretty dance teacher Audrey (Diane Foster), who at a young age was orphaned, along with her brother Marcus, when their mother was senselessly murdered by home invaders. As an adult, Amber returns to her former orphanage to stage a recital and discovers Marcus (David Backus) still on the premises, wearing a mask equally reminiscent of Leslie Vernon and Slipknot and murdering people in the name of Jesus.

While the production had enough money for a good camera and a cameo by John Savage, the actual filmmaking lacks confidence. Beat after beat comes close to good, but the effective moments sit side by side with the duds, sometimes in the same scene. A potentially original torture sequence patterned after a passion play is sullied by confusing staging and the killer's incomprehensible, endless monologue. The tragedy of Amber's backstory is blunted by the intercutting of this life-changing event with a gratuitously revealing shower scene. Most of the kills are egregiously scored with thrash-metal riffs (the whole film is practically a feature-length commercial for Bullet Tooth Records), turning one well-shot bathroom-stall murder into a YouTube fan video. Gore FX that would have been decent in quick flashes are lingered on, such as the eponymous killer viciously stomping and crushing someone's skull. While Backus nails it with his physical performance, the choice to cut to a lame fake head under his boot ruins everything.



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Another case in point is an early series of helicopter shots; they stay onscreen for longer than a minute, and do nothing more than establish that the characters are driving in Jersey. It's as if director (and writer/producer/editor/cinematographer/sound designer/co-star) Matt Farnsworth was afraid to scrap anything costly. Lead actress Foster is also a misused resource: She's easy on the eyes, but also holds together her early scenes with skill. She's actually convincing as the kind of girl who would wear stiletto heels and fishnet stockings into a church, innocently kneeling at the altar while the priest raises an eyebrow. Just as Foster appears to be on her way to delivering an interesting performance, though, the movie pulls the rug out from under her character, who spends the next hour screaming, running and pleading for others to listen. While there's no indication in THE ORPHAN KILLER of her potential range, Foster still doesn't deserve to be reduced to the damsel in distress with a hot body.

Similar directorial misjudgments, like the prolonged garroting of a teenage girl with barbed wire, or portraying the mother's killers as racially charged urban stereotypes, additionally hamper any chance of gleaning bad-movie fun from THE ORPHAN KILLER. The producers clearly hope to forge a Chromeskull-esque low-budget franchise out of the character, but THE ORPHAN KILLER's facile antagonist wallows in ugliness without achieving intensity. A killer whose habits were beaten into him by authoritarian hypocrites in a religious fervor? That's become a lazy cliché even as simple character motivation, yet this movie builds its entire concept around it.

It all supports the impression that these filmmakers had everything they needed to create something special, and simply chose to go the least interesting route. Ultimately, it doesn't matter whether a well-composed shot or nicely designed set appears; the film still hits the same grave-but-shrill tone and maintains it over two-thirds of the running time. The honest attempts at atmosphere in THE ORPHAN KILLER come as a welcome change after watching dozens of incompetently made grassroots horror flicks, but also serve as a reminder that a good genre movie transcends those factors in ways this one never does.

