

## “THE HAGSTONE DEMON” (Film Review)

Written by Samuel Zimmerman  
Sunday, 30 May 2010 08:17

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There haven't been too many movies lately revolving around witchcraft and satanic rituals, and in that respect, THE HAGSTONE DEMON is a fun breath of fresh air. Shot on what was clearly a low budget, Jon Springer's tale of a haunted apartment complex (which has played festivals and is awaiting wider release) is generally successful and entertaining throughout.

Douglas Elmore, played by Mark Borchardt (the subject of the 1999 documentary AMERICAN MOVIE), is hired as the caretaker for a now-condemned apartment building that's soon to be torn down. Douglas spends his days getting to know the inhabitants of the Hagstone, fixing their leaky pipes, listening to them rant about the trashy blonde squatting in the vacant room downstairs and drinking himself into a stupor. He's still taking the suicide of his wife Julie pretty hard, and it doesn't help that since he moved into the Hagstone, he's been seeing her everywhere. When its already low number of residents begins to dwindle via murder (whether it's supernatural or not is undecided), Douglas becomes the prime suspect. With the help of new tenant Barbara and his priest brother-in-law, he tries to uncover the truth amidst strange occurrences and the even stranger people surrounding him.



THE HAGSTONE DEMON does have its problems. Borchardt seems to be pretty much playing himself, and was apparently cast more for his personality and presence in the community than for his actual acting ability. His performance is pretty flat, though he does have a certain charisma and hits the occasional note right on the head. The rest of the cast range between decent, mediocre and pretty terrible, though even the terrible ones add to the atmosphere in an odd way—not in the sense of “so bad they're good,” but in a more positive, off-kilter vibe. For instance, Jay Smiley as Bill Thompson, an eccentric old man who claims to know everything about the building, hams it up in every scene he's in and is clearly playing a character much

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older than he is. But rather than detract, his character casts a bizarre cloud over the proceedings that make them all the more enjoyable.

A similar role is that of Karna, the homeless girl secretly staying in the empty room. Because the building is so close to demolition, Douglas lets Karna’s illegal residency slide and even does her favors, like coming by to fix the toilet. She’s a strange beast, this Karna: She has a very unsettling, skinny pet cat, speaks in a distant, spaced-out tone and very well may be a prostitute. Nadine Gross’ portrayal of her oddball personality is a little silly, and maybe too obvious, but it somehow works.

The highlight of HAGSTONE, however, is Springer’s direction and cinematography. While the movie was produced with very little economic means, he does a great job of elevating its look and keeping the visuals interesting. Mostly shot in black and white with bits and pieces in color, the film uses each appropriately. When Borchardt heads into a crawlspace in the floor and finds a demon, the ultra-shadowy dark space coupled with only the creature’s visage shining through is quite effective and creepy, while many of the colorful satanic rites give off a surreal, madness-filled atmosphere.

There is a definite noir undertone to the film, given its monochromatic lensing, Douglas’ journey/descent and his narration. The latter isn’t exactly a joy to listen to, as Borchardt’s delivery isn’t too strong, and neither are his lines. Much of the dialogue feels stilted and awkward; in some places that’s fine because of the “off” nature of characters, but in others it’s just a coupling of weak writing and the actors’ recitation of it.

But as more is revealed (why everyone acts so strange, and what Douglas and his late wife have to do with all of this), the story becomes increasingly interesting, though the ending might leave some unsatisfied with its open-ended nature and setup for a sequel that may never come. Still, THE HAGSTONE DEMON has a great quiriness and energy that makes the film worth a watch and helps it surmount its typical low-budget problems. Sometimes you can tell that even with setbacks such as these, the people involved believed in and put a lot of love and effort in their creation, and such is the case with THE HAGSTONE DEMON.



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