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DEVIANT DVD: PENANCE (A.K.A. DEVIL'S DUNGEON)



PENANCE

Starring Marieh Delfino, Graham McTavish and Michael Rooker

Written and directed by Jake Kennedy

Independent Media Distribution

The plot: At the suggestion of her ecdyasiast friend Suzy, single mother Amelia (Marieh Delfino: *Jeepers Creepers 2*) reluctantly turns to stripping to support her young daughter. The money is welcome, but things take a turn for the horrible when Amelia accepts a mysterious “high class” job which leads her into the clutches of Geeves Rahm (Graham McTavish: *Rambo*), a sadistic madman on a bloody mission to purify the morally tainted souls – and bodies – of the strippers he and his staff have kidnapped. Unfortunately, that purity comes at the edge of a scalpel blade.

The verdict: All movies are made with an eye to profit, but those made strictly to recoup their investors are especially prone to disregard common ideas of decency and quality.

Writer/director/producer Jake Kennedy (*Days of Darkness*) admits in his interview in the DVD extras that *Penance* – or *The Devil's Dungeon* as it was originally titled – was born from a “cold, calculated decision” to make a horror film with boobs because that’s what appeals to the 16- to 24-year-old demographic coveted by his producers. Kennedy’s honesty is refreshing, but it doesn’t excuse this distasteful film.

Not that taste is a deciding factor in the quality of a horror film – hell, many fans take it as a point of pride that their cinematic diet would induce vomiting in less hardy moviegoers. But the degradation endured by Kennedy’s characters (especially young mother Amelia) is uncomfortable. Which perhaps is the point, as the traditional horror trope of the “last girl” requires its survivor to endure the agonies of hell before winning her freedom. But should Kennedy be credited with thinking about it that deeply, or is he more interested in torturing women on screen for the sake of increased DVD sales?

Shot on an obviously low budget, *Penance* has its share of competent actors. Michael Rooker (*Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer*) is generally wasted in the role of a smirking hitman, while McTavish brings dignity and a deadpan menace to the role of Geeves, although the overwrought, repetitious dialogue Kennedy has saddled him with distracts from our appreciation. Delfino has to be commended, though, for enduring her character’s humiliation (including being stripped topless and whipped in a pale imitation of ‘70s-era Nazisploitation flicks like the *Ilsa* series). She commits to the role and provokes our empathy through sheer force of will, despite having to do dumb things like carry around a video camera during an escape sequence because of the film’s *Blair Witch*-style “found footage” aesthetic.

Mostly humourless, *Penance* is a slog, albeit a brief one at just 80-odd minutes. Those still getting wood off the dregs of the dwindling torture porn canon may appreciate its calculated outrage factor, but *Penance* just makes me want to confess the sin of having watched it.

Key extras: Alternate endings, cast interviews in character, director commentary, director interview

Rating: 4/10

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