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December 7, 2009

DVD REVIEWS

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Penance (2009)

Penance (2009)
Music Video Distribution

85 mins. · Not Rated
16x9 · 1.85:1

Format
DVD

Audio

Subtitles
None

Extras

Starring
Tony Todd, Jason
Connery, Marieh
Delfino, Graham
McTavish, Eve Mauro,
Michael Rooker

Review by
[Ray Van Horn, Jr.](#)

Rating

How far is *too far* these days? It appears modern horror cinema (at least in the underground) is feeding on a new renaissance of ante-up persecution tactics. Maybe today's would-be horror director is so deeply impacted by the full-on brutality filmed decades ago in "Make Them Die Slowly," "I Spit On Your Grave," "Cannibal Holocaust" and the original "Last House On the Left" they take the challenge upon themselves to uncork the *next* level of shock. It's no secret modern terror hounds (particularly of the male genus) are addicted to generous helpings of sex 'n snuff from their celluloid intakes. Thus the soup du jour of the day, it appears, is the torture film...or *torture porn*, as some critics lambaste it.

Eli Roth's "Hostel" films rekindled, if you will, this contemporary affinity for ancient Romanesque bloodlust within horror films. Long before movies, there was of course, the Grand Guinol Theatre, reputed for its notorious gore spectacles, which included nudity, torture and in some cases, alleged true death.

Apparently we've come no further as a society when Hostel begets an onslaught of strip 'em and bludgeon 'em tales like Jake Kennedy's (Days of Darkness, Automaton Transfusion) Penance. Though inspired by reported true events (namely atrocities committed by ousted Australian obstetrician Butcher of Bega, Graeme Stephen Reeves), Penance is like The Blair Witch Project-meets-Saw-meets-Women In Prison exploitation flicks-meets-Ilsa, She-Wolf of the SS.

One huge caveat, however; "Penance" strangles and maims the jugular, or rather, the pubic regions.

The set-up of "Penance" is rather strong as our lead Amelia (Marieh Delfino) is a struggling mom in the process of making an audition video, assumedly to worm her way into a reality show. With a sick daughter and no reliable means of income, Amelia ends up turning to stripping in order to make a living. Told straight through the camera lens, Penance follows the trigger-shy Amelia's misadventures as tag-a-long pupil to her friend Suzy (Eve Mauro), a seasoned pro named "Sassy" on the streets. The sequence of watching Amelia selling herself out to gain the necessary money to care for her ailing child is intriguing enough, particularly when Amelia suddenly turns on the juice at a party, then freaks out in the middle of her sizzling (though shrewdly conveyed as jagged and naïve by Delfino) performance.

When Suzy later ends up getting beat up by a client, Amelia agrees to fill in on a high-profile job under the alias "Sassy." Bad move, obviously. Amelia (and her camera-toting buddy) is plummeted into a probity play to outdo all others. It takes almost no time before Amelia is thrust into a dank underbelly of torment where sodomy might actually be considered light roughhousing in comparison.

Stripped, whipped, beaten and tazered, nothing Amelia faces compares to her ultimate fate at the hands of the militaristic-stamped Butcher of *Baker* (Graham McTavish). Known as "Geeves" in this film, he is a right wing moralizer who, as it turns out, is an ousted OB-GYN wanted nationwide for the sexual mutilation of over 300 women. Though this exposition doesn't

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come late in the film, you know something dastardly dwells within this sicko and his cronies (Valorie Hubbard amongst them), who are ironically helping Geeves keep a video journal of his "purification" efforts.

"Penance" works on a primal level in provocation, especially in the corridor scenes. The bitter pallor of the lighting and the greenish hue of Amelia's entrapment creates the appropriate aura of doom she and her sisters in pain face at the hands of Geeves. His main objective in life (somewhat similar to Jigsaw's motives) is to turn the sordid lives of strippers into a more puritanical, God-fearing existence. Unfortunately for Amelia and the other captured strippers (not to mention her buddy, who gets shot by Geeves), the only way towards salvation according to Geeves' laws, is to physically remove the labia from women, where mankind's original sin was conceived.

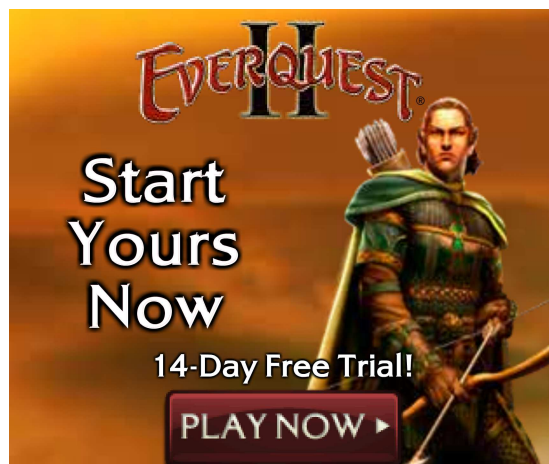
This is where "Penance" gets absolutely nasty and viewer be warned; Jake Kennedy spares few rods in his conveyance of this stomach-itching depravity. It's to the nauseating point Geeves actually saves his "trophies" in a jar then flushes them down a toilet as a symbolic sacrifice to God.

You think you're off the hook at that point? In his *own* act of contrivance, Geeves severs his testicles off in grotesque, gore-geek fashion. Was that really necessary? You be the judge.

Geeves offers his victims one last glimmer of hope after flogging, electrocuting and severing them apart with no sanitary clean-up. They usually fail the final test, given the way Geeves' associates go through their parts in mocking fashion en route to snuffing out the girls. Naturally, Geeves and his motleys are in for a big surprise themselves as the previously timid Amelia retaliates in vicious style.

Keep your eyes peeled for a couple of horror flick cameos by Richard Brooker (Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer) and Tony Todd (Candyman). Brooker is especially frosty as Mann, a hired goon who delivers the film's heftiest punchline: "Can you help me? No. Can I help you? No. Can you help yourselves? No. Are you absolutely, positively fucked? Yes."

If anything, Penance is a claustrophobic one-up of Hostel and Last House On the Left that leaves scars upon any who dare confront it. Though Diary of the Dead, Blair Witch Project and even Look are superior predecessors to the now-trendy life-through-the-camera narration, Penance is cleanly executed and effectively cold. Bodies dropping in front of Amelia's video perspective are appropriately unnerving. Penance is an animalistic foray into Hell which no even-minded individual can coast easily through. In fact, one might need a disinfecting jump in the shower in order to get clean of this cruel experience.



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