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**Penance**

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Review by [Jan Jane](#) | posted December 8, 2009 | [E-mail the Author](#) | [Start a Discussion](#)

**The Movie:**

*Penance* is one of those 'first person' movies. A text blurb at the beginning of the picture tells us that 'these tapes were round at the abandoned Lichtenstein Hospital for the criminally insane.... Along with fourteen dead bodies.' If the whole style made famous by *The Blair Witch Project* and more recently *Cloverfield* and *Paranormal Activity* bothers you, look away because stylistically speaking, this movie is cut from the same rug. Thematically, however, *Penance* gets points for at least trying a few things to differentiate itself from the so-called torture porn (a horrible and useless term if ever there was one) genre that it's probably going to get lumped in with.

So what do these supposedly found tapes tell us, or show us? A pretty young woman named Amelia (Marieh Delfino) has a pretty tough life. She's a single mom and isn't having the easiest of times making ends meet, so in order to support her child she decides to work as a stripper. Before you scoff, it does make sense. She's got the looks and the body to make a good shot at it and it's an easy way for a looker like her to rake in some much needed cash. She learns the in's and out's of the trade and takes to it like a natural and initially, everything seems to be going quite well for everyone's favorite new peeler.

That all changes when one night her friend and co-worker, Suzy (Eva Mauro) gets the Holy Hell beaten out of her while out on a job. Complicating matters for poor Suzy is the fact that she was supposed to be working at the club that night, and in her current state, that's just not going to happen. She convinces poor gullible Amelia to work for her that night, but she soon realizes that something isn't right. Her ride shows up,

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a strange car driven by a mysterious man (Tony Todd) who takes her not to the club but to an undisclosed location where, after meeting a surly hitman (Michael Rooker) in a garish white suit, she's forced to dance for a man with some very serious issues (Graham McTavish), not the least of which involves cleansing women like Amelia of their sins...

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*Penance* succeeds in one area where a lot of modern horror films can't be bothered to even try, and that's in building a believable and sympathetic lead character. Mariah Delfino is well cast in the lead, her Amelia is not only easy on the eyes and good looking enough that we can buy her as a stripper, but she's got a decent enough background and enough understandable character traits to work with that we want her to succeed. When she winds up the captive of a lunatic, we see her not as fodder for his rage but as someone we can root for and who we want to see escape not only with her life but with all of her parts intact. Contrasting with Delfino's work in the film is Graham McTavish, who a lot of us will remember from *Rambo* where he played the asshole. Here his character is worse than that, he's completely insane and entirely misguided and, as those types tend to be, full of pent up anger which he's bent on unleashing on those less physically powerful than he. McTavish never quit goes so over the top as to venture into self parody, rather he infuses his character with enough menace that he's actually pretty creepy. Throw in some fun supporting roles from Tony Todd and Michael Rooker and you wind up with a pretty solid cast for a low budget picture.

The picture isn't perfect - some of the effects aren't one hundred percent convincing and the whole 'found footage' tactic isn't always believable either, but *Penance* tells a decent story with some good twists and features some good performances and memorable scenes. It never relies too heavily on clichés or puts too much emphasis on screaming and suffering, rather, it shows us just enough to let us know in no uncertain terms exactly what is happening and how. Despite its flaws, it's a pretty entertaining and well made picture which makes it worth a look for fans of independent horror movies.

### The DVD

#### Video:

*Penance*, which was shot on video, looks pretty decent in this 1.78:1 anamorphic widescreen presentation. Some scenes have been lit and shot in such a way as to make them look hot, maybe a bit bleached out, so on those scenes the colors are muted but you can't fault the transfer for that when it's been done on purpose. Detail levels are okay for a lower budget film and while there are some minor compression artifacts in some of the darker scenes they're not a big deal. Aside from that, things look pretty good - there are no print damage issues nor are there any edge enhancement problems to note.

#### Sound:

The English language Dolby Digital 5.1 Surround Sound mix is also quite good and while there could have been more channel separation in some spots, there's a fair bit of surround activity to keep you on your toes. Bass response is decent if unremarkable while dialogue stays pretty clean and clear. The levels approach the red in a couple of spots when the 'horror' is

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really in full swing but that's part of the experience. No hiss or distortion to complain about here, all in all it sounds pretty good.

### The Extras:

Director Jake Kennedy provides two audio commentary tracks on this disc, the first one is a solo flight while the second one pairs him up with producer William Clevinger. Between the two tracks you get a pretty good sense of what went into getting this project off the ground and finished. Kennedy talks about casting the picture, finding locations, effects and the script and some revisions it went through while his chat with Clevinger focuses a bit more on the nuts and bolts of how this all came together and what it went through to complete.

A selection of featurettes of interest are also found here, starting with a twenty-four minute *Behind The Scenes* featurette that takes a look at what it was like on set and lets the cast and crew discuss their efforts on the picture. Kennedy gets a solo interview in a second featurette where he speaks for nineteen minutes about working on the film and covers much of the same ground that he did in the two commentary tracks. Some amusing *Interviews With The Cast In Character* is twelve minutes of just what it sounds like - in character interviews with the key cast members. A fourteen minute *Anatomy Of A Scene* featurette explores in a fair bit of detail how the cast and crew handled one core scene in the picture (revealing much more would head deep into spoiler territory so watch this after you watch the movie, obviously) while the brief three minute *How To Strip Like Marieh And Eve* is an instructional video you'll want your wife or girlfriend to watch. A four minute *Location Scout* segment shows how the various locations used in the film were chosen and explains why.

Rounding out the extras are a trio of alternate endings, a few minutes of deleted footage, two trailers for the film, promos for a few other IMD Films releases, animated menus and chapter selection.

### Overall:

A satisfyingly nasty horror film that features some surprisingly strong acting and a couple of memorably disturbing set pieces, *Penance* rises above the so-called torture porn stereotypes and provides a pretty intense and believable viewing experience. IMD Films has done a fine job on the release, loading it up with extras and presenting the film in pretty decent quality as well, making this a solid recommendation for those who like their horror films a little rough around the edges and firmly rooted in realism.

Ian lives in NYC with his fiance where he writes for DVD Talk and for AV Maniacs. He likes NYC a lot, even if it is expensive and loud.

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