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Case Number 17828: Small Claims Court



Penance

MVD Visual // 2009 // 85 Minutes // Not Rated
Reviewed by Appellate Judge Tom Becker // December 3rd, 2009

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Appellate Judge Tom Becker is two Hail Marys and an Act of Contrition short of salvation.

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Scales of Justice

Judgment: 40

Perp Profile

Studio: [MVD Visual](#)

Video Formats:

- 1.78:1 Anamorphic

Audio Formats:

- Dolby Digital 5.1 Surround (English)

Subtitles:

- None

Running Time: 85 Minutes

Release Year: 2009

MPAA Rating: Not Rated

Genres:

- [Bad](#)
- [Horror](#)

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The Charge

"Incarcerate these impure whores."
—The welcome wagon is rolled out for some unfortunate strippers in **Penance**

Distinguishing Marks

- Commentary
- Alternate Endings
- Deleted Scenes
- Featurettes
- Trailers

The Case

If the government ever takes over the film industry, I hope the first law they enact is a ban on handheld, self-shot, **Blair Witch**-style projects. What started as an interesting experiment has now blossomed into a hideous and hackneyed convention that misfires far more than it works. For every [Cloverfield](#) there are 10 other films that get the whole self-shot thing wrong, like [Bryan Loves You](#) and this film.

In **Penance**, the "Why are we shooting this ourselves?" trope comes from our heroine, Amelia (Marieh Delfino, [Auto Focus](#)), and her desire to be on a reality TV show. Apparently, R-TV requires contestants to submit audition tapes of some sort, and this one evidently demands a lengthy month-in-the-life production, so we get all kinds of expository information about Amelia (single mother, broke, sick child, and so on). We also learn (as will the R-TV people) that she briefly and uncomfortably becomes a stripper, though she's fortunate enough to strip at parties that allow her friend Will to follow her around with the camera, capturing every dull but lascivious move.

One night, a stripper friend can't make it to a private party, so Amelia is called into service. Naturally, she brings along Will, and they are both hustled into a limo with the windows blacked out. They find themselves at that great American party spot, The Shattered Institution, along with a few other confused strippers. Next thing they know, they're downing mickey'd champagne. Will is shot by a psychotic hood, played by that leading light of psychotic-hood portrayers, Michael Rooker (**Henry, Portrait of a Serial Killer**), and the ladies are left at the mercy of a nutjob in military dress (Graham McTavish, [Rambo](#)) and his fleshy female accomplices.

The nutjob, like so many nutjobs, has this whole Jigsaw thing going on, wherein he wants these bare, naked ladies to suffer for their sins—or, as he solemnly puts it, he wants to "purify" them. Since **Penance** is a torture porn film, this means lots of beatings, taserings, and other painful and degrading things. Amelia is naturally terrified at the prospect of being imprisoned in this dank yet sterile environment and indignant that her poor luck happened when she was filling in for a sick friend—"I'm not a strippah!" she asserts.

Now, you might be wondering, How does the film maintain that whole self-shot thing? I'm wondering that too. For some reason, everyone at the Shattered Institution—inmates and nutjobs alike—has a camera. Amelia frequently talks into hers and strolls around the Shattered Institution taking pictures of the other strippers' wounds so she has "proof" of the terrible things that happened—though logic would suggest that if she has the opportunity to show these tapes to someone, her own marks and bruises would speak for themselves. The nutjob also has his own personal videographer who follows him around as he commits atrocities and snarls about purification and such.

The only thing "new" **Penance** brings to the torturesploitation table is its climactic torment: genital mutilation. Yes, it seems that our nutjob is actually an OB-GYN, and he performs a grisly and anesthesia-less operation on poor

Accomplices

- [IMDb](#)



Amelia. As is expected from the genre, this is gross and skin-crawling stuff. It's also offensive as the day is long.

Penance is tagged as being "Inspired by True Events," and the "true events" in this case refer to a gynecologist in Australia who was accused of sexually assaulting and mutilating the genitalia of hundreds of patients over the course of a decade and a half. No, this doctor was not dragging strippers off to a Shuttered Institution and making merry while dressed up like a paramilitary dictator; rather—and I think, more horrifyingly—he was doing this heinousness in his office and in hospitals under the guise of offering care. In his commentary, Director Jake Kennedy talks at length about this case and how it inspired him to make this film.

So, why not make a film that's actually about this? Well, because then you run the risk of making a powerful, realistic drama about everyday women at the mercy of a sanctimonious fiend in a legitimate position of authority. Clearly, Kennedy was going for bloodied strippers and a grue-heavy take on the women-in-prison genre. The problem, of course, is that beyond this late-game mutilation sequence, there's nothing to distinguish **Penance** from the dozens of other gorefests in which women are punished merely for being hot. It's actually on a lower rung than many such films because it's so haphazard. The business with everyone having cameras is just silly and intrusive; we get no satisfactory explanation as to who the nutjob is until some on-screen text at the end, which co-opts the Australian gynecologist story; we don't know who is cohorts are or how he chooses his victims; and so on. If you listen to the commentary and watch the alternate endings, it gets worse, as it seems there was a high-minded but half-assed attempt to toss some social politics into the stew and make this an allegory about female genital mutilation. That this abhorrent practice, which is still carried out in many parts of the world and has been condemned by global organizations such as Amnesty International, should be considered the basis of an exploitation flick is far more grisly than anything that appears on screen.

For such a gross and disposable film, MVD has turned out a crack disc. Picture and audio are great (though the lack of subtitles is annoying), and it's fully loaded with extras: two commentaries (one by the director, another from the director and the producer), alternate and deleted scenes, interviews with the cast (in character), an interview with the director, a "making of," an "anatomy of a scene," an extended scene of Amelia learning how to strip, and a featurette on the location scout. It's a lovely package that only disappoints when it's unwrapped.

If you want to see a truly horrifying "Inspired by True Events" film about the subjugation of women and the corruption of power in service of soul saving check out [The Magdalene Sisters](#), an excellent movie about the abuses heaped on "wayward" girls by Irish nuns in the 1960s. As far as **Penance** is concerned, I'd suggest sackcloth and ashes as a preferable alternative to sitting through this film.



1 Tip of
a flat belly:

Cut down 3 lbs
of your belly
every week
by using this
1 weird old tip.



The Verdict

Nothing to see here...nothing new, anyway. I'm wondering how many trips to the well it's going to take before this already-tired genre flatlines.

Guilty.

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