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REVIEW: AEGRI SOMNIA



Films like *Aegri Somnia*, tales of nightmarish figures and landscapes as experienced through the eyes of our "unreliable" lead character, date back as far as 1920 with the German silent film classic, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*. And since then we have seen plenty of films about folks traversing their own personal hell and madness only to reach that inevitable conclusion where it turns out they are either dead, insane, in hell, or all of the above! 1990's *Jacob's Ladder* might just be the definitive take on the concept, and seems to have heavily inspired writer/director James Rewucki to make *Aegri Somnia*, whose title translates to "a sick man's dreams."

Edgar (Tyhr Trubiak) lives a miserable life. And who wouldn't be miserable when everything's in black and white? (Jokes!) He works a miserable job, goes home to a miserable and hateful wife, and can barely speak in full sentences without inserting Obama-like 20-second pauses in between his words. On one particular day, after a spat with his wife, she goes into the bathroom and takes her own life. This event will propel him into his self-imprisoned world of madness and guilt, where walking nightmares come to life and taunt him from dark corners. These brief trips into his subconscious begin to escalate, leading him to a very dark and dangerous revelation.



Along with *Jacob's Ladder*, *Aegri Somnia* owes an awful lot to David Lynch's 1977 oddity *Eraserhead*. From the black and white landscape to the introverted lead character to the deluge of pregnant pauses, *Aegri Somnia* is very much a spiritual reinterpretation of what might be one of the oddest but most accessible of Lynch's surreal repertoire. But *Aegri Somnia* also exists in a post-1980s world, featuring very familiar yet somehow unique-feeling set pieces and creatures. Dark-cloaked, rag-covered, and barbwire-encircled monsters whisper into Edgar's ears and very much recall Clive Barker's collection of demonic angels from his *Hellraiser* stories. And they jitter, chatter, and move unnaturally like the things following Tim Robbins in *Jacob's Ladder*. Eerie images of bloody bathtubs and things in your periphery vision are the stuff of *Freddy Krueger*. It's an interesting, engaging,



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creepy, yet flawed hodgepodge of horror cinema.

By the time the ending happens, you can't help but say, "no shit," but much like the recent *Shutter Island*, the film isn't so much about the ending as it is the journey. And it's about our damaged character realizing what we as the audience already have a sneaking suspicion about: that he's obscenity-screaming, Tom-Cruise-grinning insane.



While *Aegri Somnia* never manages to consistently capture the viewer from the first frame to the last (which can be fully attributed to the need for one more tightening pass in the editing room rather than a failure to tell a story), I must give all the credit in the world to writer/director James Rewucki. What he was able to accomplish on what must have been a very modest budget is an immediate cause for praise, regardless of the film's overall success. It is a quiet film about quiet madness, and because of this the film will lose audiences more attuned to dripping monsters, whipping chains, and bloody murder. In fact, I can see most audiences downright hating it. Generally I am a big fan of films that try to bestow upon its audience the same feeling of insanity or hell that its characters are experiencing. Like *Silent Hill*, or *The Cell* before it, where the films lacked in strong stories or central characters it made up with fantastic visuals, and at the very least affects on a visceral level, if not on an emotional one. *Aegri Somnia* very much belongs in that category. It really does feel like a nightmare, and the visuals it contains are some of the most impressive I've seen within the low-budget horror world. (*And as an aside, the scene where Edgar buries his wife is shot fucking beautifully.)

While it's easy for abstract filmmakers to be labeled as pretentious simply because they want to present their film in an out-of-the-box manner, I do find Rewucki's choice to alternate sequences in black and white as well as color, along with the creatures' propensity for randomly whispering lines from T.S. Eliot, a little dubious. I'm sure Rewucki had a reason for doing both (you could make the argument that the creatures which haunt Edgar are the "hollow men" of which Eliot wrote, but if so, what's the significance of that poem to him in the first place?), but I just don't understand what that point was. And claims of pretension are caused not by abstract expression, but when there seems to be no rhyme or reason to utilize the tactic; and so the danger of Rewucki being labeled as such becomes dangerously close to being a fair criticism.



Regardless of my ultimate reaction to the film, I've been thinking about it off-and-on for the last three days. Filmmakers consider such a reaction to be a strength, whether that reaction be overwhelmingly positive or negative. Three days ago I had decided *Aegri Somnia* wasn't a film I ever had to see again, but the more I think about it, the more infectious the desire to revisit Edgar's nightmarish world is becoming.



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