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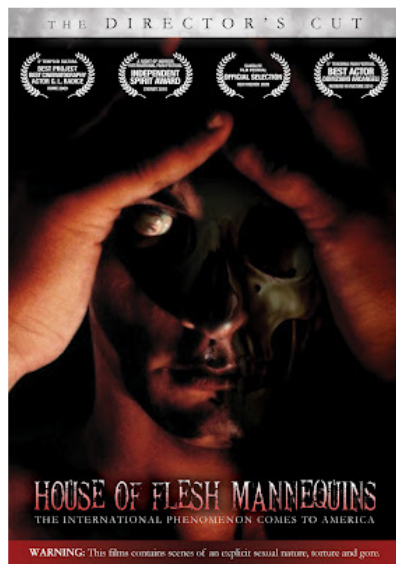
Indie Horror Films

All genres of suspense, terror, and horror will be reviewed by Richard Gary. His address to send preview copies supplied upon request to rbf55@msn.com.

Tuesday, March 13, 2012

DVD Review: *House of Flesh Mannequins: The Director's Cut*

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House of Flesh Mannequins: The Director's Cut

Directed by Domiziano Cristopharo
Elite Entertainment, 2009 / 2012
96 minutes, USD \$19.95
elitedisc.com
MVDvisual.com

During the 1980s, there used to be a term for films like this, often associated with the likes of Richard Kern and Nick Zedd (who coined the phrase): *Cinema of Transgression* [Here]. While this particular one may be on the borders of that idiom, as it usually refers to pictures made in New York on cheap cameras, the philosophy is similar: push the envelope way past the point of the mainstream until it becomes its own object of synergy.

Filed in Los Angeles with a mostly American actors and a crew from Italy, *House of Flesh Mannequins* dances between reality and the mind, sometimes mixing them both, and not always coherently, but never failing to be interesting.

The basic plotline of this supposedly true story (though no information to that effect appears on search engines) is that 30-something Sebastian Rhys (Domiziano Arcangeli) is a freelance photographer who had survived a twisted childhood thanks to a scientist father who used him as an experiment in sleep deprivation. Now he films bloody accidents and snuff films for an underground audience. Still living in the family building that has since been turned into apartments, Sarah Roeg (the incredibly lovely Irena Hoffman) and her father (Giovanni Lombardo Radice) move into one of the flats. Sarah, way too young for Sebastian (we are introduced to her at her 18th birthday party), pushes herself on him, not knowing toward what his life is directed, but you know she's bound to find

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out by the conclusion.

Meanwhile, Sebastian casually slips in and out of reality while watching violent images (that he has filmed) and of home films of his own childhood tortures (recorded by his father), most often while listening to Italian operas, such as *Paligacci*. A segment of the film is a(n obvious) extended dream sequence where he walks through the titular House of Flesh Mannequins, in a peep-show theater, where people are viewed in various forms of disfigurement (one leg, dwarfism, etc.) or in the process of being mutilated.

Right on the DVD box, it states clearly, "Warning: This film contains scenes of an explicit sexual nature, torture and gore." Yes, it does. Mind you, this is not the first "straight" film to have full explicit sex in them (e.g., Tinto Brass and Bob Guccione's 1979 *Caligula*, Vincent Gallo's 2003 *Brown Bunny* and John Cameron Mitchell's 2006 *Shortbus*), in this case including intercourse, oral, masturbation and even a money shot, but they are all very quick takes and highly (and intentionally) unerotic, though somewhat unnecessary, other than to add to the transgression I mentioned earlier (note that none of the main actors in the story are involved directly in these actions).

The film achieves its goal in that's it is extremely disturbing. I'm not saying it all makes sense, and first-time director Domiziano Cristopharo tries a bit too hard to be a *giallo* leaning towards Dargento-meets-Fulchi (more to the former than the latter in style, though in the proto *Four Flies on Grey Velvet* period, around 1971). In this fashion, the film actually moves at a slow pace, with close-ups, quiet conversations, extreme gore, weird angles, and a series of quick cut bits (usually the more transgressive moments, such as the snuff films) mixed into long scenes with minimal edits. Take out the oddities, and this could be a BBC-snail pace piece, but please keep in mind that it is never, ever, dull, despite it's usually minimalist shots.



Domiziano Arcangeli

Much of the acting also fits into the low-key giallo framework as well. As you can see by the trailer (below), Arcangeli goes from expressionless (in most scenes) to extreme emotion, especially after he cuts off his beard in the last act. Archangeli, as with many of the actors in this film, have quite the resume, including many in the horror genre, such as *Orgy of Blood*, *Waiting for Dracula*, *Silent Night Zombie Night* and *Werewolf in a Women's Prison*; he was also in one of my fave recent indie movies, the western *The Scarlet Worm* [HERE]. Before 2000, he appeared in numerous *cinemas Italiano*.

Likewise, Radice (aka John Morghen), whose character smokes while having a tracheal stent in his throat, manages to be very

menacing, even while being monotone and demonstrating restraint in movement (one of the reasons he won best actor in the 2009 *E Tempo di Cultura* festival in Rome). His resume includes many classic period Italian horror films, such as *City of the Living Dead* and *Cannibal Ferrox*, and was also in Scorsese's *Gangs of New York*. Despite his slim build, he looks like he could easily tear you even more than a second one).



Giovanni Lombardo Radice

Hoffman, looking much taller than her 5'9" frame (probably thanks in part to her co-star's height, or lack thereof) goes between lighthearted to concerned until the end when thing become clear to her. She actually seems the most comfortable in her role in the film, and appears the least to be *ac*-ting. She's been in a few indie films, ranging from the acclaimed *Moonlight Sonata* to the comedic *Transylmania*, and even made an appearance on *Two and a Half Men*.



Irena A. Hoffman

Many of the other actors, however, do some pretty terrible line readings, such as Hollywood legendary memorabilia collector Randal Malone, or Iggy Pop-looking Murrugun the Mystic, though their characters are more peripheral, albeit pivotal.

While being hard to watch in its extremity, the film is also quite beautifully shot, with minimalist sets, bright colors, primary hued lighting, and a sharp sense of contrasts (both color and black & white, and shadows. Oh, and wetness, lots of various types of wetness. It doesn't surprise me that it's won a bunch of awards, such as the 2010 Independent Spirit Award at the *A Night of Horror International Film Festival* (held near Sydney, Australia).

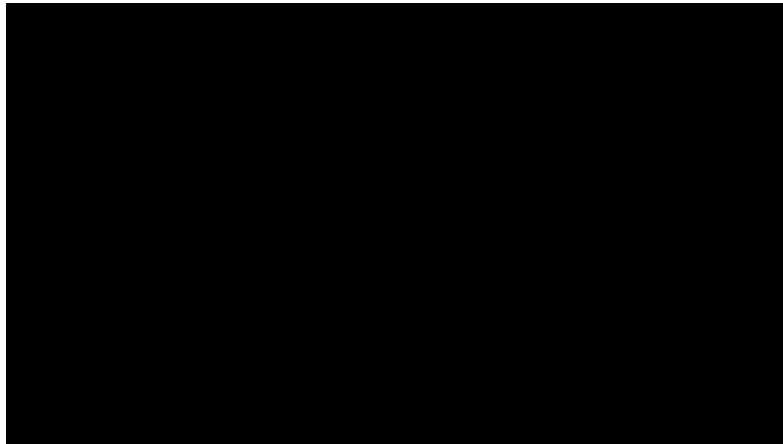
This is the Director's Cut, but not having seen the earlier incarnation, I have to go by this one. A bit different than a number of other films that glorify the hardcore of different types, such as *Hostel* (2005) or *A Serbian Film* (2010), there is an artistic bent that goes beyond what is happening in the story, bringing it into the *giallo* subgenre similar to the '70s, but with present sensibilities.



Director Domiziano Cristopharo

There are a few extras worth noting. One is called "It's Just Flesh," which shows some of the F/X prosthetic designs and applications. There are a bunch of intermingling "Interviews" that is quite enjoyable, but I would have liked it better if there was some captions telling who was whom in the crew. The "Behind the Scenes" piece was decent, but nothing earth-shattering. First up, though, are the complete five snuff films that the Sebastian character watches / taped. They are interesting works, but quite honestly, I couldn't watch the last one, which appears to be a real video of extreme S/M, including someone hanging by their flesh from hooks in their back, a practice that does not interest me at all. When they pulled out an electric drill, I turned it off. For myself, I don't mind if it's *realistic*, but I am bothered by the *real*.

Is *House of Flesh Mannequins* a bit pretentious? Yes. Gratuitously violent? Yes. Pornographic? Yes. Powerful? Yes. Interesting? Yes. Definitely art house material and certainly not for the squeamish, but if you have a high tolerance for the winceful, you may be surprised by its beauty, as well.



Posted by Robert Barry Francos at 4:56 PM

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