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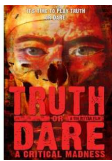


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August 29, 2010

DVD Review: *Truth or Dare? - A Critical Madness*



Every once in a while it becomes abundantly apparent that I got into movies, horror movies, and low budget movies (in that order) at the wrong stage of my life. I was very late in discovering my love for film and music and other artistic endeavors way too late. I missed so many films and experiences that would have been better to have had at a younger age. One of those experiences would

have been exposure to movies like *A Critical Madness*. A movie that has nothing left but the nostalgia factor but history would seem to indicate was a player back in the day.

The 1980's saw a change in low-budget film distribution as grindhouses and drive-ins faded into the past with the boom in the VHS market. *Truth or Dare?: A Critical Madness* was marketed as the first direct to video feature presentation of a full-length movie. Once you see it you will realize why it never went national on the big screen. Still, it apparently did very well on the rental circuit as I keep reading about how it was a staple of store shelves during the 1980's.

Let me say right now that there are spoilers contained within. I don't feel it hurts the film, in fact it may make you want to see it more despite how bad it is. However, if you do not want to be spoiled on anything, please see the movie and then come back.

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The center of the film is Mike Strauber (John Brace). Mike has had a bad day at work and upon arriving home early finds his wife, Sharon (Mary Fanaro), in bed with his best friend Jerry. He takes off after his cheating wife tells him she has found a new life and he should find some good friends. So, off he goes in his Camaro.

He ends up at the beach where he contemplates his life, complete with flashbacks to tell tale signs that something was wrong with his marriage as well as a childhood game of Truth or Dare? (where the younger Mike is played by future Backstreet Boy AJ McLean). Mike briefly contemplates suicide but then feels better use of his time would be to pick up a hitchhiker (going anywhere he is going, of course) and go camping.

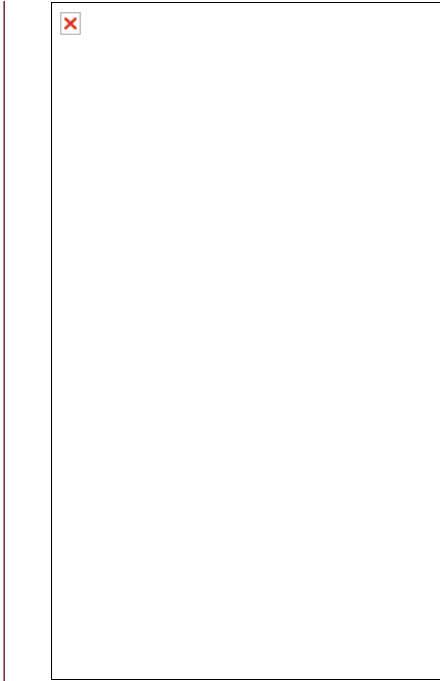
This is about where the movie really begins to go off the rails with a scene that is way out there. This is a telling scene with regards to your enjoyment, continued enjoyment, or lack thereof. First off there is the fact they have chosen to go camping instead where you would normally go with this sort of hitchhiker. Then there is the game they play, truth or dare of course! Their game quickly takes a turn for the bizarre as Mike is dared to first throw his wallet into the fire (thus destroying his identity). Next on the hit list is cutting off a finger, cutting up his chest, and ripping out his tongue. Fun stuff, right? This is where we discover there was no hitchhiker and Mike is going out of his gourd insane.

He lands in a mental hospital from which he is let go 13-months later due to budget cuts. He gets out and heads over to the old house to take care of Sharon and Jerry. Well, Sharon turns the table on Mike and he lands back at the hospital.


Some more time passes and he gets out again, not due to budget issues, oh no. This time he just straight u escapes, after playing a delightful game of dismemberment truth or dare with some imaginary cell mates. Once out he sets about his mission of revenge again, this time wearing a copper mask he made in metal shop in the asylum. Yes, that's right, a metal shop for the mentally ill.













This escape leads directly into the final third where the majority of the violence can be found. Mike goes on a rampage running people off of roads, shooting old people at bus stops, and chainsawing little kids in half just for starters. Everything culminates in a showdown at the house where.... Nope, not going to tell you that.




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I'll give up a lot about the movie, it is that sort of movie, but I won't spoil the conclusion for you. This final act brings in a number of characters with few lines or put them in places that make absolutely no sense.

It certainly is a trip writer/director Tim Ritter explains in the supplemental material that the producers tried to take way his credit upon discovering he was only 18 at the time. Plus there are stories of a special effects guy who failed to deliver and second unit directors making up new scenes and not shooting necessary sequences. All of these pieces add up to the finished product you see on the screen, complete with plot holes, leaps of logic, and wonderfully magical appearances of all the weapons, real and imagined, which spring forth from thin air.

I must share my favorite scene. Upon arriving at Sharon's just prior to the climax, our copper mask wearing killer stops in front of the house knocking over some garbage cans. A woman appears asking for an apology and berating him as being a stupid kid, accusing him of sexual assault, and continually asking for that apology. I watched wondering if she noticed the creepy mask he was wearing or the fact that he was pulling all manner of weapons out of the backseat of the car, things like knives, guns, nunchuks, a morningstar, and a chainsaw. Of course, she doesn't end well, but you have to admit that is was her own fault.



The movie is a little batty. It is definitely low budget, has a shoddy screenplay, questionable acting, and is just not very good on any level. I enjoyed it a little for the low budget zaniness and as a time capsule of the period but I would be hard pressed to actually recommend it to anyone, it does require a certain taste. I do give Tim Ritter a lot of credit for getting it done, it is quite an achievement for someone as young as he was at he time.

Oh yes, there is something to be said for John Brace's fearlessly committed performance as Mike. His wild-eyed takes and distinctive delivery are to be seen to be believed. "You want me to cut open my chest? Well, ALLL RIGHT!" Also, for some reason he kept reminding me of Ed Helms.

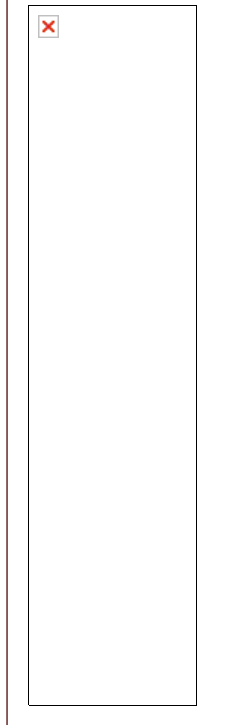
Audio/Video. In a word: awful. The DVD looks to have been transferred from some Nth generation video source. Colors are washed out and bleeding, focus is not the best, and it is just pretty ugly to watch. It is presented in 1.85:1 non-anamorphic widescreen, meaning for those of you with widescreen TVs, this will display with a black box all the way around it. The stereo audio is muddy and low. It does the job, it just isn't pretty while it does it.

Extras. There are a few extras included on the disk.

- **Commentary.** The track features Tim Ritter and a couple of others who I do not recall hearing identify themselves. It is an all right track as Ritter talks about the production and some of the troubles it had.
- **Making Of.** This featurette is Ritter talking about the troubled production and what led to him making the film. He seems to be rather bitter about the experience. Still, it is pretty interesting to listen

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Movie Review (1081)
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Music News (52)
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New Movies (252)
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to him talk about it,

- **Film Facts.** A couple of slides with things like filming locations.
- **Trailers.** Original marketing trailer where they trumpet the fact it was made exclusively for the home video market. We also get trailers for a pair of sequels, both of which look even cheaper than this one.

Bottomline. The DVD presentation leaves a *lot* to be desired. The movie will definitely appeal to a certain segment of the horror loving community, just don't fool yourself into thinking it is a good movie. It isn't.

Not Recommended (save for the select few).



Article first published as DVD Review: *Truth or Dare?* : A Critical Madness on Blogcritics.

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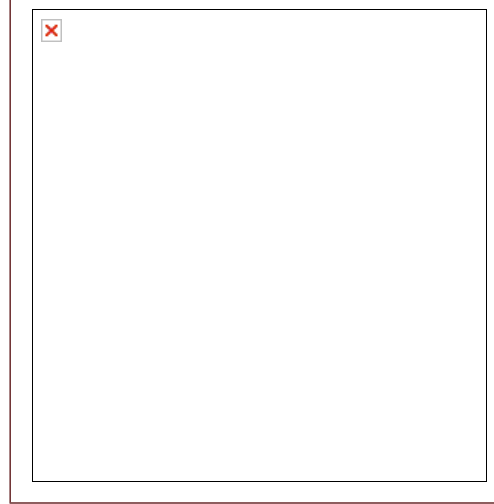
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