

FFanzeen: Rock'n'Roll Attitude With Integrity

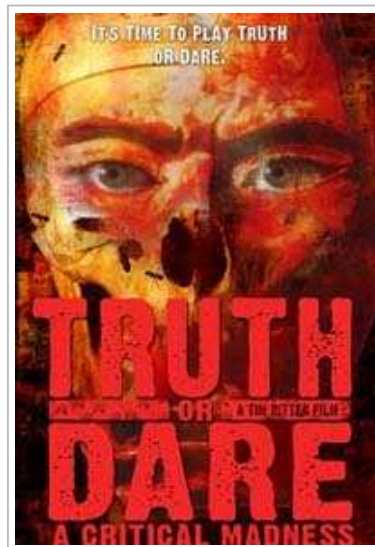
Through the writings and photography of Robert Barry Francos, a view of the arts and culture, including everyday life.

THURSDAY, AUGUST 19, 2010

DVD Review: "Truth or Dare: A Critical Madness"

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Images from the Internet



Truth or Dare: A Critical Madness

Directed, and written by Tim Ritter

Sub Rosa Studios, 1986

87 minutes, USD \$9.95

SRSCinema.com

MVDvisual.com

Around the time VCRs came into fashion during the early to mid-1980s, the top two sellers / renters at video stores were porn and horror. This opened up a whole new genre of cinema, the made-for-video release. Most of the time these were shot on low budget (making some of Roger Corman's films look expansive), on inferior quality stock, and with actors who were, well, lets just say not exactly the Meryl Streep caliber.

Director Tim Ritter was 18 or 19 when he directed this film, shot entirely on 16mm, giving it a grainy, '70s television feel (the main character driving a '77 Firebird helps with that image; I kept expecting Dolemite to exit the car). The Chicago company that helped finance the film tried to take it away from him when they found out

Blog Archive

- ▼ 2010 (93)
 - ▼ August (6)
 - [DVD Review: "Truth or Dare: A Critical Madness"](#)
 - [John Otway interview: 'Attaway Otway!](#)
 - [Book Review: I Did It Otway, by John Otway](#)
 - [Road Trip to Yellowknife, Day 3: High Level, AB to...](#)
 - [Road Trip to Yellowknife, Day 2: Athabaska to High...](#)
 - [Road Trip to Yellowknife, Day 1: Saskatoon to Atha...](#)
 - ▶ July (3)
 - ▶ June (9)
 - ▶ May (16)
 - ▶ April (10)
 - ▶ March (21)
 - ▶ February (15)
 - ▶ January (13)
- ▶ 2009 (78)
- ▶ 2008 (70)
- ▶ 2007 (22)

About Me

Robert Barry Francos
c/o 62 Timber Ridge Rd,
Commack, NY 11725. From 1977-88, I used to publish a music magazine in New York called FFanzeen, which dealt with the wide-ranging independent music scene. I also photographed many

his age, but with a lawsuit, he retained custody. In the meanwhile, they undermined him at every turn, by changing plot points, actors, and even core storyline on second string shooting, making this an inconsistent mess as far as continuity, so the viewer must go beyond suspension of disbelief, and enter a land of no limits, to the level of *Gilligan's Island*. A well-discussed point is that the main villain (there is no mystery on who the killer is from the first scene) keeps coming up with weapons out of nowhere, including machine guns, a (very fake looking) mace, a machete, and a large bolt-cutter.

Okay, that being said, if one is willing to accept the film for what it is and the period it was birthed, this is a fun popcorn-chomper. It really is a time capsule when the rules for straight-to-video product had not yet been written, and anything was possible. For this subgenre at that time, *Truth or Dare* is a fun ride almost *because* of the sheer ridiculousness of it all, and I do *not* mean this as a put-down at all. It is what it is, and this film is no better or worse than, say, 1978's *The Tool Box Murders* (sans Pamelyn Ferdin, of course).

Lead nutcase Mike Strauber, acted at first as nerdy and rising to full insanity, is played by John Brace, whose previous credit is as a member of the Burt Reynolds' Playhouse in Jupiter, Florida (near where this film was shot). His only other credit listed is also from 1986, which is an appearance on *Cheers*. Brace does some serious scenery chewing, *but* he manages to be one of the more professional actors in the picture; though I wonder how much he was actually there since during the last half he is wearing a full-face mask made of copper (wouldn't that get really hot in Florida?) and his body shape and hair changes often as his character is obviously being played by stunt people.

Most of the cast is amazingly amateurish, in a fun way, though. Raymond Carbone plays a wild police detective named Rosenberg who is obviously from the Chicago area (and a real ex-cop), Terence Andreucci plays the comic relief cop who is way too old and physically stiff for his part (it's fun watching him try to crouch behind, say, a small rider mower), and Kerry Ellen Walker portrays a baffling hitchhiker (though her brief role soon becomes clear) who was obviously hired more for her cleavage, boxy figure, and big hair than for her acting talent (this is her only credit). And practically the entire Duff family makes an appearance in various roles (perhaps since the film was cast by Priscilla Duff?). I was especially laughing at the "teen punks" who were obviously in their overweight 30s. Then there is the wonderfully named actor Asbestos Felt, one of the only people in this film that has an upcoming credit.

The only on-camera cast-person who had a somewhat healthy career is Mary Fanaro, who played Stauber's wife, though her many credits seem to peter out in 1999. Of course, there is an infamous cameo by a then-tween A.J. McLean, who would go on to have silly facial hair in the Backstreet Boys.

bands from the period (and since). And the beat goes on.

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Perhaps because of the time period before MTV was influencing *everything* with music video style editing, or maybe it was that Ritter just didn't really know what he was doing, the edits are kept to a minimum, with shots lasting much longer than one would expect these days, lingering in imaginative ways. For example, when Mike leaves his house after finding his wife in bed with her boss (hey, the first shot is of them in action, so no spoiler alert needed here), he storms out with his wife standing at the door. The camera stays steady on her back and the door as he storms out of frame for a few seconds, and then his car appears backing out of the driveway into the street. With such slow editing and pacing, more drama is built up. Sure, Sergei Eisenstein said that editing equals action, but in these days of 2-second cuts, this works by doing the opposite.

Yes, there is gore and appliance special effect, and some of them are well done, though most of kind of cheesy, of course. Most of the action is done off camera, such that the viewer will see the knife come down, and then the next shot the limb is already cut in *CSI* full gore. It's rare to actually see the action itself rather than the aftereffect, and yet it still retains a nice blood-to-gore ratio.

There are a lot of enjoyable holes in the story, my favorite - even more than the mysterious appearing weapons - being that the police have trouble finding Mike, even though he drives around in his '77 Firebird, wearing a full-face copper mask (surely a nod to Jason and the Shape), with his blinkers on throughout the whole film. And I won't even go into him shooting three people at a bus stop with a machine gun while traffic continues to flow around him on a busy street.

There are some obvious comedy set pieces, as well as the unintentional, such as the use of the text crawl under the image of the Sunnydale Mental Institution, or the complaining neighbor who rants, oblivious to Mike loading up on weapons from the car.

The music deserves some comment: *wow*. Tacky '80s synth (usually one bar repeated over and over) for the tense moments, lame piano twinkling (probably also the synth) for the softer emotional parts, and the final credit song, "Critical Madness," which is just, well, bad (in a fun way), sung occasionally on key by Kay Reed with the Church of Our Savior Choir (I kid you not), from Chicago.

There are extras on this DVD. Trailers for this and the next two (shot on video) *Truth or Dare* sequels (fourth is currently in production) - they look more like porn S&M tapes - and an interesting Behind-the-Scenes documentary, which is essentially Ritter talking over clips, like a commentary. And speaking of commentaries, there is a full length one by Ritter and a couple of the actors. Now, don't go expecting a shot-by-shot analysis, but the conversation is pretty interesting about getting funded, the lawsuit, and the like, to keep it from getting dull (like any of the Farrelly Brothers' or Kevin Smith bore-fest talks).

The word *classic* has been bandied about for this film, and in its way, it is. It was one of the first of a new direct-to-video genre, and while it's far from perfect, it's more than adequate if one is willing to take the step to just accept it for what it is. I probably won't be the only one to say this, but: go ahead a get this film... I dare you.



Posted by Robert Barry Francos at [12:01 AM](#)

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