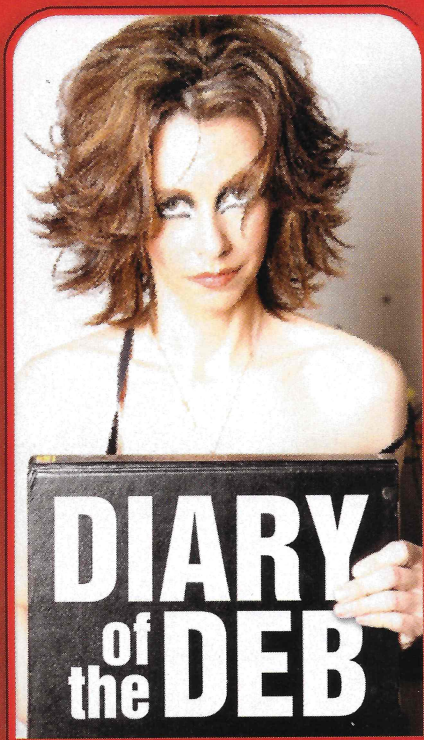


I had previously appeared in a couple of cameo roles in director Richard Griffin's comedy/horror/exploitation flicks, so when he sent me the script for *Exhumed* (on special-edition DVD June 18 from Wild Eye Releasing), I was expecting to read more of the same over-the-top fare. He told me I would be playing the Governess, which sounded potentially funny. I had been Mother Superior in his nunsploitation movie *Nun of That* and Mrs. Chubb in his fetish-themed *Splatter Disco*, so maybe this "Governess" was head of some off-the-wall girls' school or the overseer of a wacked-out psycho family.

As the pages started spitting out of my printer, I began scanning the story. This was not going to be a comedy in any sense of the word. This was going to be a moody, unique thriller/noir/horror. It read like a Harold Pinter play, in a sense—Pinter meets Hammer. It had a certain '40s flavor, with bite and style, requiring the actors to communicate mostly without words, as little of what was really going on was being said aloud. No overwritten dialogue; no long, drawn-out explanations spilling from the characters' mouths. It was well-crafted by writer Guy Benoit—



By **DEBBIE ROCHON**

the air we breathe. Therefore, the air itself is toxic. Suffice it to say, we were kind of f**ked from the beginning.

While our magnetic leader was around, those were truly the good times, when large groups of cultists dwelled together and lived by the same rules. Now, with only their daughter Laura (played by Sarah Nicklin) still alive, the last remaining members are hunkered down in a house serving as a self-created prison, where they have sequestered themselves from the evils of the world—but with no true leader left. With curtains drawn, doors locked and the necessity of existing under the radar, the pocket-sized group carries on—though with finances growing thin, it becomes imperative to take in a boarder. So our little gang allows a handsome college boy named Chris (Michael Reed) to rent one of the rooms. Laura, longing to feel a connection with a man like she constantly reads about in her 1950s romance magazines, takes a fancy to him. Thus begins the final unraveling of this barely functional pseudofamily unit.

Michael Thurber, a notable Rhode Island stage actor, plays the Butler, a longstanding member of the cult. He has his own way of mentally controlling this mismatched brood via mirror-image mannequins he positions reflectively in the basement. He tries his best to clean up the Governess' bloody deeds but, goodness, even he can't fix everything. Rocki (Evalena Marie), one of the last to join the cult during its heyday, deals with her now-stifling surroundings through a combo of yoga and overt sexuality that ruffles the feathers of everyone except Laura. Rich Tretheway plays Lance, a sexually repressed, beer-drinking, sensitive but slow lug of a man. His guitar goes unplayed,

EXHUMED

Digging Up a New Cult

an inimitable story that commanded respect and skill to pull off properly. This was a dream come true for me, material that could be filled with everything I had to give.

truly have a sense of the dynamics that would make this bird fly.

The story centers on the last remnants of a cult. Its founder and his wife are no longer alive, but during their stay on this



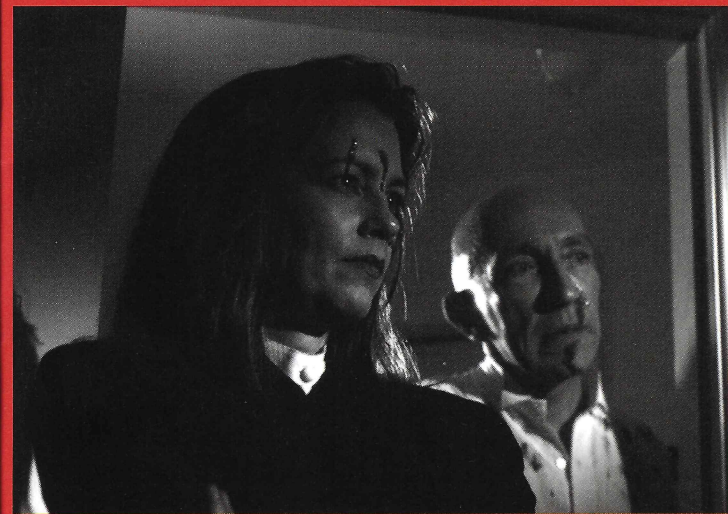
Black and white with a butcher knife—Debbie follows in a great horror tradition in *Exhumed*.

The cast was assembled and a read-through planned. As we went through the script, it was still difficult to fully comprehend the mood we would ultimately create with the piece. It was engaging, but not until the first day of shooting did I

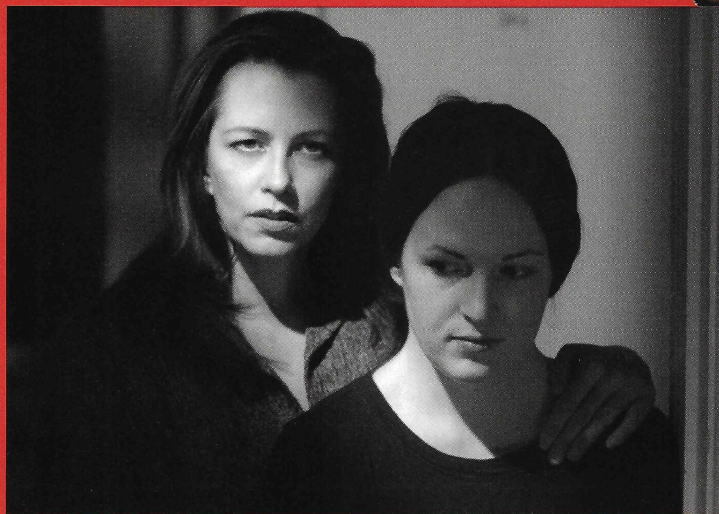
rock, countless people around the continent embraced their ideas and beliefs. Our deceased leader had based his theories on the poison in this world, a toxic molecule that emits from the very sun we need to sustain life and affects everything, even

symbolic of the oppressive atmosphere of this doomed house. And even the booze can't blur the horrors he will witness as all the people around him start unspooling into madness.

The Governess has the paramount task



The Governess (Debbie) and Butler (Michael Thurber) will take care of you, all right.



There's more than family traditions stifling Laura (Sarah Nicklin).

of keeping all remaining members in line and abiding by the laws and beliefs that were once the cult's essence. Our dogma has been so watered down and diluted since our leader's untimely passing that the Governess will stop at nothing to hold onto any semblance of our glorious past. Murder is a viable, even preferential, option.

This was not going to be a comedy in any sense of the word... It read like a Harold Pinter play—Pinter meets Hammer.

In keeping with the style in which it was written, the movie needed to be shot in black and white—a rarity these days, for many reasons. One of the most important is that you need a DP and gaffer who know how to shoot and light for monochrome. Enter cinematographer Ken Willinger and his crew, who nailed it perfectly. *Exhumed* truly looks like it was shot in the '40s.

To prepare for my role, I read a lot about cults. An excerpt from one book called *Take Back Your Life: Recovering from Cults and Abusive Relationships* provided the Governess' core emotional essence: "The most loyal members (the 'true believers') feel there can be no life outside the context of the group. They believe there is no other way to be, and often fear reprisals to themselves or others if they leave—or even consider leaving—the group." This was indeed the obsession and focus of my character, so I dug into this thought process and flew with it.

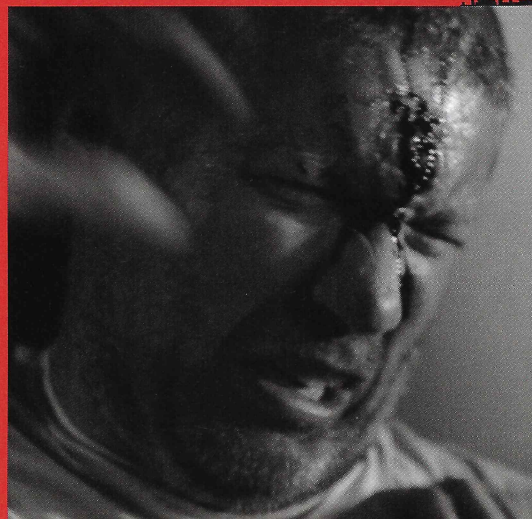
As long as there are people who need to be told what to think and feel without questioning anything, there will be predators looking to take advantage of them. The term

"cult" was coined in 1618; doesn't that tell you just how long these mindbenders have been around? They saw a huge resurgence in the '60s and '70s, when some of the more famous cults sprouted up and were splashed across the front pages of newspapers worldwide: Charlie Manson's Family, Jonestown (which gave us the expression "drinking the Kool-Aid") and my personal "favorite," the Forever Family.

This group was started by Quebec-born Stewart Traill, who, prior to his guru rock-star days, was an atheist and vacuum-cleaner repairman. As a religious leader, he has been in many cultic researchers' top five in terms of the harm and psychological damage he inflicted upon his followers. His mental brainwashing was highly difficult to deprogram. In a satirical twist, I guess, according to an article originally appearing in the *Manassas Journal Messenger*, Traill received government funds for his Haiti "mission" as part of

President George W. Bush's faith-based initiative.

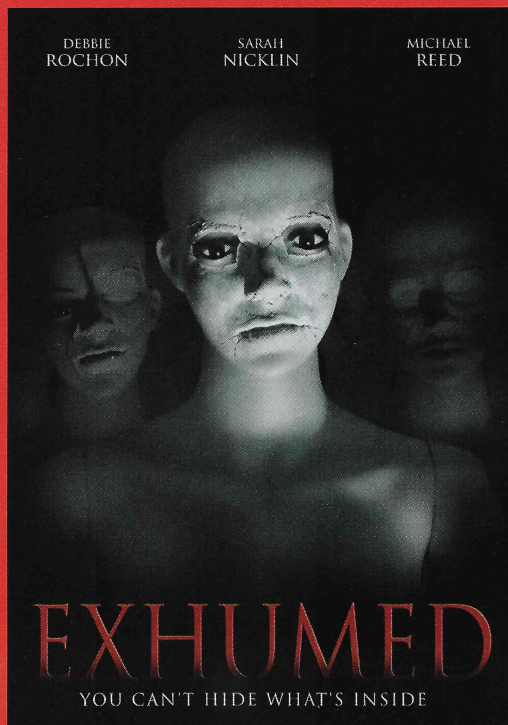
We've seen cult leaders dupe and lure countless people with lies and fabrications based on books like the Bible (*The Branch Davidians*) and *Dianetics* (Scientology). While many have encouraged deviant sexual activity, others swung in the opposite direction, like the Heaven's Gate gang (sex was not on the daily to-do list for this bunch, and the majority of the men even castrated themselves in preparation for the "next level"). Doomsday



Despite the title, if you die in this house, you may not necessarily be *Exhumed*.

cults have had the extra zing of panicking their members into obedience, because after whatever cataclysm they were awaiting arrived, it would be too late to join and you'd be left behind. (Looking back, it seems they were better off missing their deadline after all).

Dates to look forward to if you're a doomsday watcher: psychic Jeane Dixon predicted Armageddon will take place in 2020, and if that slips your mind, you can rest easy because Pastor Kenton Beshore claims we'll see the Rapture by 2021 at the latest. Did you know that Spam is apparently good for five years after the expiration date?



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