

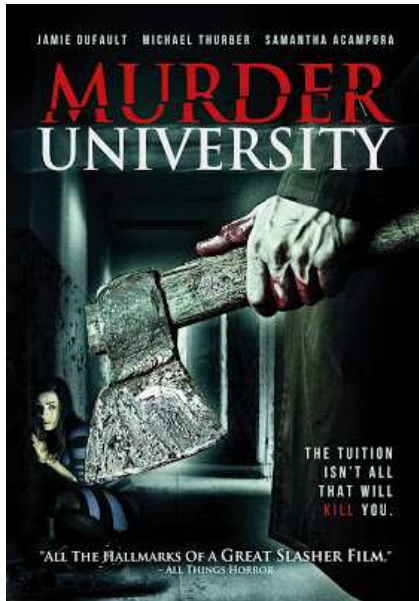
Indie Horror Films

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.

Monday, November 11, 2013

DVD Review: Murder University

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Images from the Internet



Murder University

Directed by Richard Griffin
Scorpio Rising
96 minutes, 2012 / 2013
www.WildEyeReleasing.com
www.MVDvisual.com

Okay, I'm going to admit it, Richard Griffin is becoming one of my favorite indie horror directors. He has covered many different sub-genres in his films such as *The Disco Exorcist* (2011) and the stunning *Exhumed* (2011), and now this one, which is homage to '80s slasher movies. Of course, the comparisons are inevitable with the *Scream* franchise, but I'm not going there; I don't really feel a need to do that because the Wes Craven film had a budget of about \$15 million, and this was shot for a mere \$6,000, and yet accomplishes so much.

This picture follows many of the formulaic cliché's that crop up in these kinds of films, but it is rarely done as well, in this tongue-in-cheek way. For example, there is the obligatory "prolog" that sets up future events. This takes place in 1983, at a college in Massachusetts (though was filmed in Rhode Island, as is most of Griffin's releases). Most of the time, the rest of the film is in "the present," but this one is set just a year later, with anyone hardly caring about the ghastly events that took place on the campus of "Murder U" (i.e., "murder you"). Apparently there is a devil masked (and hooded cloaks, of course) group using sharp objects such as axes and knives to create some serious damage.

But let me back up a bit for a moment to make a comment on that opening sequence. Did not see the surprise coming; I let out a big laugh and a wow, which is quite the statement after having seen slashers since Joan Crawford's *Strait-Jacket!* (1964). This moment alone tells you that you are not going to see a standard, run-of-the-mill chop-em-up.

The story is written by Lenny Schwartz with flair towards both the gruesome and the funny bone. Most of the comedy is not played for broad laughs, but rather it's done smartly and on occasion, such as a running joke with the main character's mother. My favorite though, and this was extremely subtle, was the password for getting into a frat party by saying a password to a redneck (wearing a Stars and Bars toga) at the door, which is a line from James Brown's "Say It Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud."

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But the writing is only one of the pillars that make this a strong and multiple (festival related) award-winning film. Another is the look of it. The picture is HD and clear, including the night scenes. The use of RGB colors for the lighting, especially in the night and forest locales is beautiful, giving it a nice '80s Creepshow (1982) feel, but with a clearer and sharper image, and applied subtly (there's that word again) rather than garishly, as most use it.

The next pillar is the acting. Griffin tends to use many of the same folks in multiple releases, and this seems wise (though I miss the team of Reed and Nicklin). Many of the cast come from the New England *the-yay-tah* crowd, so they know how to nail a scene quickly and accurately. Yes, there is a bit stage overplaying here and there, but it seems less as time and films go on. The three main characters are strong in both writing and presentation.

Griffin stalwart Michael Thurber is solid, period. Sure, he was a bit goofy in *The Disco Exorcist*, but his *Exhumed* performance was a nuanced tour de force. Here, he plays the aggressive, loner, verbally vulgar police detective Forresster with a deeply buried soft spot. From what I understand, this slovenly character, who wears a Columbo-type overcoat, is far from Thurber's real personality (he wore a tux to the film's premier, for example), but his naturalistic acting ability makes the detective come alive.



Michael Thurber



His daughter and co-sleuth, Meg, whose mother had been killed by the demon-masked killers when she was a wee lassie, is portrayed by the very fetching Samantha Acampora. With those lips and doe eyes, man, I would have had such a crush on her in college. Luckily, she's a naturalistic actor, and takes the kind of female-lead-yet-support role as if she were part of that personality, which is falling in love with the central character, Josh.

I know I've seen Jamie Dufault, somewhere, but I cannot remember where. However, here he takes the lead. Though obviously diminutive (most characters tower over him), he creatively works both the shy-virgin and passive-aggressive sides of his character with conviction. Josh is a shy lad with a sad secret who is starting



Jamie Dufault

college (like much of his classmates, he's obviously older than the part he's playing, but that's pretty endemic in the genre, so I'll move on). He is a wide (blue) eyed youth who leans towards sweater vests (there is some kind of a running motif where many characters wear horizontal striped shirts, including a Freddy Kruger colored one worn by Meg) and

Samantha Acampora

deer-in-headlight reactions. But you know there is an itch tugging inside him (again, the genre). One thing I found interesting, and this really has nothing to do with anything per se, but Jamie has a couple of interesting "tells," where he will either turn his head or lick his lips as the excitement level is ramping up, or a key comment is about to be spoken.

There is also an exceedingly large support cast (all the better for sizable body count), and I need to comment here. Again from a theater background, they run from the average looking to the attractive (e.g., Elyssa Baldassarri and Tonya Free). Plus there are a number of outstanding basically secondary or even tertiary characters which stand out, such as Sean Sullivan as a leather jacketed insane thug, and especially Aaron Peaslee as a tool DJ, Juicy K. Thunder (who, in a throwaway line, mentions his college radio show called "Morning Mishegas"); check out his dancing in the DJ booth in the background at a gay strip club (where Forresster frequents for – er – coffee). You may not notice him at first, but if you do, he'll steal the scene. Oh, and there is also a police investigator who looks alarmingly like (but is not) disgraced ex-Illinois governor Rod Blagojevich.

Griffin has quickly developed into a decent filmmaker. His shots inside a particular modernistic building are a good example. He uses the frosted glass stair landings in a way to show movement that is quite lovely, and the first time we see Josh walking through the building, the stairs and floors almost look like an MC Escher drawing.



Along with the remarkably large body count, there is also a fair number of gore scenes (without being "gore porn") which are sometimes amusing, but most times well done. The only effect that gave me pause was a scalping that looks good for the effect itself, but it almost looks like the knife isn't really touching either the head or the scalp. Otherwise, every other effect, from different levels of beheadings with a knife to more subdued killings (such as using shadows, or in one case, showing someone at knee level). What is also nice is that

these killers are not gender specific. In other words, it's not just females that are hacked, but rather everyone within range, including some guy getting an ax (the weapon of choice here), well, let's just

say sharp edge up.

The extras include some trailers (including two of Griffin's I mentioned here) from Wild Eye Releasing and a deleted scene. There are also two commentaries. One of them includes a number of the cast (excluding the two male leads) which occasionally gets overwhelming trying to tell who talking, though it's still worth a listen because they do manage to put out a lot of information. The other track is the director and writer, which is more interesting, though I suggest listening to both if that interests you.

It's nice to see a horror film with humor that doesn't rely on Adam Sandler-level toilet jokes, but rather is quite intelligent, along with some twists and turns that have some originality to them. And besides Thurber's perfect nuances, Dufault has a delicious sense of timing, and can spit out dialog that is clear and emotive/empathetic. There are lots of surprises here, but one that isn't is the consistency of Griffin's output, as all his films have a shine on 'em. I look forward to seeing the projects that came after this, including *Dr. Frankenstein's Wax Museum of the Hungry Dead* and especially *Normal*.

Posted by Robert Barry Francos at 10:58 AM



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