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THE AISLE SEAT - by Mike McGranaghan



"TORTURE CHAMBER"



This review must come with some background. Around 2000, I got an email from a filmmaker named Dante Tomaselli, asking me to review his debut horror film, *Desecration*. The premise sounded interesting, so I took a chance on it and was impressed. As with almost all low-budget debuts, it had some rough edges, but it was also clear that Tomaselli had a unique visual sense, coupled with a showman's flair for presentation. About three years later, Tomaselli emailed me again to see if I'd take a look at his follow-up, *Horror*, which starred noted "mentalist" Kreskin. I reviewed the film, noting that the growth its director showed was impressive. A few more years later, I checked out *Satan's Playground*, which again found its director making

noticeable strides as a filmmaker. This brings us to *Torture Chamber*, Dante Tomaselli's newest and most accomplished film. In a time when so many horror films are cranked out simply to make a fast buck, it's refreshing to see one from somebody capable of approaching the genre with a sense of artistry.

The story centers around 13-year-old Jimmy Morgan (Carmen LoPorto), who is possessed by a powerful evil. Attempts to exorcise him are unsuccessful, bordering on calamitous. *Torture Chamber* follows Jimmy as he escapes a mental institution and leads a group of children, Charles Manson-style, in acts of murder. Their home base is an abandoned castle tricked out with instruments of torture. That description probably makes *Torture Chamber* sound like a *Saw* ripoff, which couldn't be further from the truth. What no plot synopsis can convey is the tone and effect Tomaselli achieves. The story is told in slightly fractured style so as to slowly integrate the lurid facts of Jimmy's tormented history. We learn how he became the way he is and what some of the disturbing factors were that led to his monstrous nature.

Like *Desecration*, *Horror* and *Satan's Playground* before it, *Torture Chamber* features certain trademarks of its writer/director. The imagery is very surreal and creepy, with every shot crafted in a manner designed to leave you with an off-kilter feeling. For instance, there is a chill-inducing shot of a masked killer taken from the point of view of someone having a plastic bag forced over their head. The film also makes magnificently eerie use of sound. Not music. *Sound*. Ominous sonic creations play throughout, often almost

subliminally, to add another layer to the overall sense of menace. And, as always, Tomaselli has lots of religious imagery; his films explore the battle between good and evil in very fundamental ways. All of these things add up to a viewing experience that is quite unlike what you see in mainstream horror.

At times, a few of the actors (including *The Sopranos* star Vincent Pastore, who plays a psychiatrist) come off a bit unpolished, and a little more development of Jimmy before his descent into evil would have strengthened him as a character and made him more distinctly fearsome. Nonetheless, *Torture Chamber* is a wholly original, deeply disturbing movie with an incessantly spooky atmosphere. My favorite quote about horror, which I haul out at least once or twice a year,

About me

The Aisle Seat critic, **Mike McGranaghan**, is a member of the Online Film Critics Society.

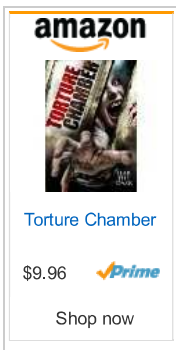
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comes from Wes Craven, who said: "The first monster that an audience has to be scared of is the filmmaker. They have to feel in the presence of someone not confined by the normal rules of propriety and decency." From my limited interactions with him over the years, Dante Tomaselli seems like a very nice guy. But when he's behind the camera, he fits Craven's description to a tea, and that's what makes him a special director in the realm of cinematic horror.

Torture Chamber is available on DVD now. For more information, please visit [the official website](#).

Torture Chamber is rated R for violence, language, some drug use and brief sexual images. The running time is 1 hour and 30 minutes.



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