



DRILL TO THRILL

THE MAKING OF **DRILLER KILLER**

Words: Simon Hooper

It's hard to reconcile the image of a Catholic raised New Yorker and recent convert to Buddhism as being the same person who directed the notorious UK banned video nasty, *Driller Killer* yet that's how Abel Ferrara, dubbed the, 'skid row Scorsese' first came to the public's attention.

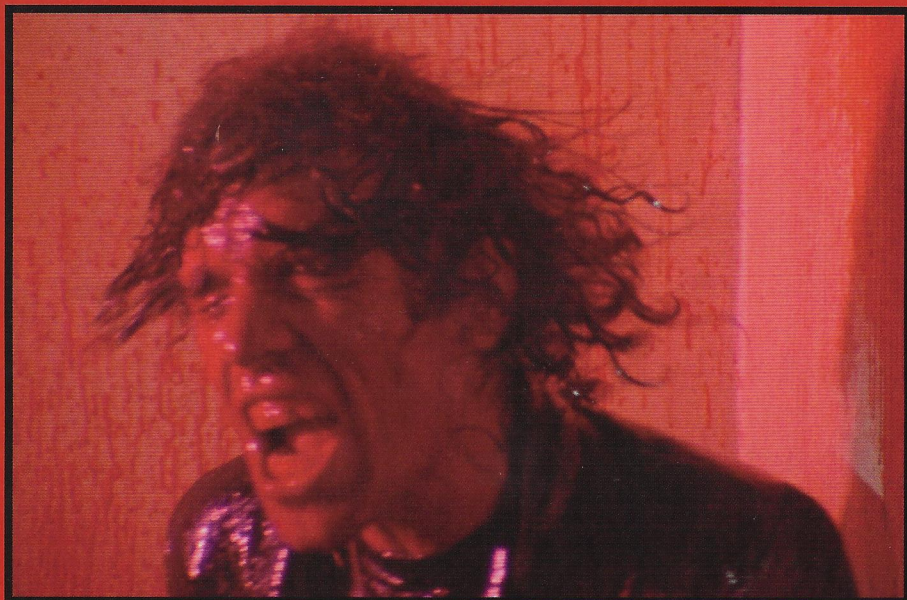
Growing up in the Bronx area of New York he made friends with Nicholas St John who became his regular screenwriter and long time collaborator. Together the pair started making their own films on Super 8mm throughout their school and college days where Ferrara arranged a student exchange and got himself over to London. Whilst there he made the acquaintance of an employee at the BBC and managed to get hold of some 35mm filming equipment to try out a few ideas. Returning to New York he shot several short films and by 1973, during his final year in college, he shot the film, *Could this be Love?* about two young women who bring a prostitute back to a party being held by one

of their husbands. The film included what would become a regular preoccupation in his films, namely sex, which would crop up frequently throughout his career but most obviously in his next film, the 1976 less than subtly titled, *9 Lives of a Wet Pussy*. To no one's surprise it was a hardcore porn film. Running at an hour long it also featured the director as an actor in a scene where he gets naked with one of his female co stars. It was never his intention to appear on-screen but his original male star... um... pulled out at the last moment. It was his first and last porn film and was a job he only took to earn some money as well as the chance to broaden his filmmaking skills.

In 1977 he briefly brushed with drug addled rock royalty Keith Richards of Rolling Stones fame where he made a short five minute film with him but Ferrara was increasingly aware that he really should start to make proper feature films and that was to be, *Driller Killer*. Ferrara had spotted a niche market and freely admitted that, "This was an exploitation film made for a very specific audience that Hollywood wasn't catering for".

The Seventies had been an era where low budget horror films had demonstrated that there was money to be made from the genre most obviously with Tobe Hooper's, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* which had been shot for minimal money but had made, and continues to make, a small fortune (\$30million and still counting). At the time the mafia were increasingly moving into laundering their money by funding films which had the potential to generate even more money (the notorious porn film, *Deep Throat* with its budget of \$25,000 is thought to have made almost \$50m and made a star of Linda Lovelace). "If Texas Chainsaw could make \$30million" said the director, "why couldn't we?"

It was here that Arthur Weisberg became involved, a shady character with Producer screen credits as Rochelle Weisberg, who stumped up the cash when the budget to profit potential ratio was pointed out to him. On a tiny budget, far less than the \$100,000 Ferrara thought it might cost he set to work. He chose to base the film's lead character on someone who was close to home. "It's about a friend of mine, a great oil painter who had a lot of anger in him" he later admitted. The friend was D.A. Metrov, a musician and lead singer, who ended up playing Tony Coca Cola in the film (quite whether the soft drink firm were ever aware of this is not known). Metrov was not Ferrara's first choice wanting instead to cast the US punk rock outfit the New York Dolls as the band but Ferrara was unsure



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as to how long it would take him to shoot the film and consequently it became clear that it was just not practical. In the end Metrov served multiple purposes as he was also an artist and the production featured his paintings throughout and if anything the film became an unwitting showcase for his art as well as his music, with his band even playing live at the start of the film during the 'in concert' scene.

Out of necessity the low budget meant costs had to be kept to a minimum. Consequently Ferrara, yet again, appeared in one of his own films, this time clothed but playing the lead. He also used his own apartment as the main location (their real landlord appears early on, holding a lighter). In the best tradition of filmmaking the money had to be on the screen and to avoid having to pay for filming permits they covertly shot many of the homeless males drinking in the street nearby. The car that the Roosters band turn up in was a production car and the crew roped in members of the public which included the gang of youths running down the street who agreed to take part after they were offered a case of beer to do it, however Ferrara admits, "they never got it". Some of their covertly shot scenes could have ended up with the actors getting arrested – their mock stabbing in the street was fortuitous in that an ambulance turned up for someone else whilst they were filming the scene. In fact nearly every exterior they shot on the streets was almost guerrilla filmmaking. Yet despite all of this filming

on the run it was not shot quickly because as Ferrara admitted, "we didn't know how to". The takes were relatively short, not really due to any aesthetic reason but purely because the actors were not that great and it can be seen in his later films that the takes got longer as he employed better actors (by the end of the Eighties he would be working with Christopher Walken, Peter Weller and Kelly McGillis amongst others). Also it hardly helped that according to Ferrara there was also a lot of cannabis being smoked on the set.

Driller Killer featured many of the directors signature themes with religion being the most obvious in the film's opening scene but it also, almost inevitably, featured sex with its gratuitous two girl shower scene which seemed to be there more for titillation than anything else, though there's a case to be made that the two girls were actually the central love story and Ferrara happened to share the apartment with them.

Ironically, though Ferrara played a painter, he was the first to admit that he could not paint and so any scenes where he was painting he was doing his best not to spoil Metrov's work which at that point had already been sold. The paintings caused further problems when the crew were allowed to shoot in an art gallery but as the shoot went on the owner grew increasingly concerned that the paintings on the wall were not touched. The production had a tentative association with a truly great artist when they shot one



FOR A DIRECTOR WHO HAD SHOT PORN THIS WAS THE MONEY SHOT AND ITS SHEER SENSATIONALISM FOUND ITSELF ONTO THE FILMS ADVERTISING IN LATER YEARS

street scene outside a building where Andy Warhol worked and Ferrara has claimed that he frequently saw the pop artist looking out of the window when they shot a scene with one of the victims getting drilled to death.

A horror film with such a trashy and exploitative title needed to deliver on the gore and on occasion they were helped by the son of Exorcist effects guru, Dick Smith, but due to the sporadic nature of filming Ferrara had a hand in most of the effects, notably with the first victim who meets his maker on the studio floor and the director had made a mix of blood substitute using ketchup, mayonnaise and pretty much anything else he wanted to put in the mix providing a comical rather than horrifying pool of blood. And perhaps that's what Ferrara intended, as he's gone on record as saying that he regarded the whole film more as a comedy than anything else. But it's an argument that didn't stand too much examination as far as the BBFC were concerned, especially when it came to its most notorious sequence where a

homeless man gets drilled through the forehead. For a director who had shot porn this was the money shot and its sheer sensationalism found itself onto the films advertising in later years, bringing it to the attention of the UK censors which in turn got it banned. Ironically the victim

in question was an actor who specialised in Shakespearean drama (whose plays, as most school kids soon realise, are no stranger to the macabre) and he bought his children along to set on the day of filming for an effect that had much riding on it as Ferrara was not even sure it would work. In

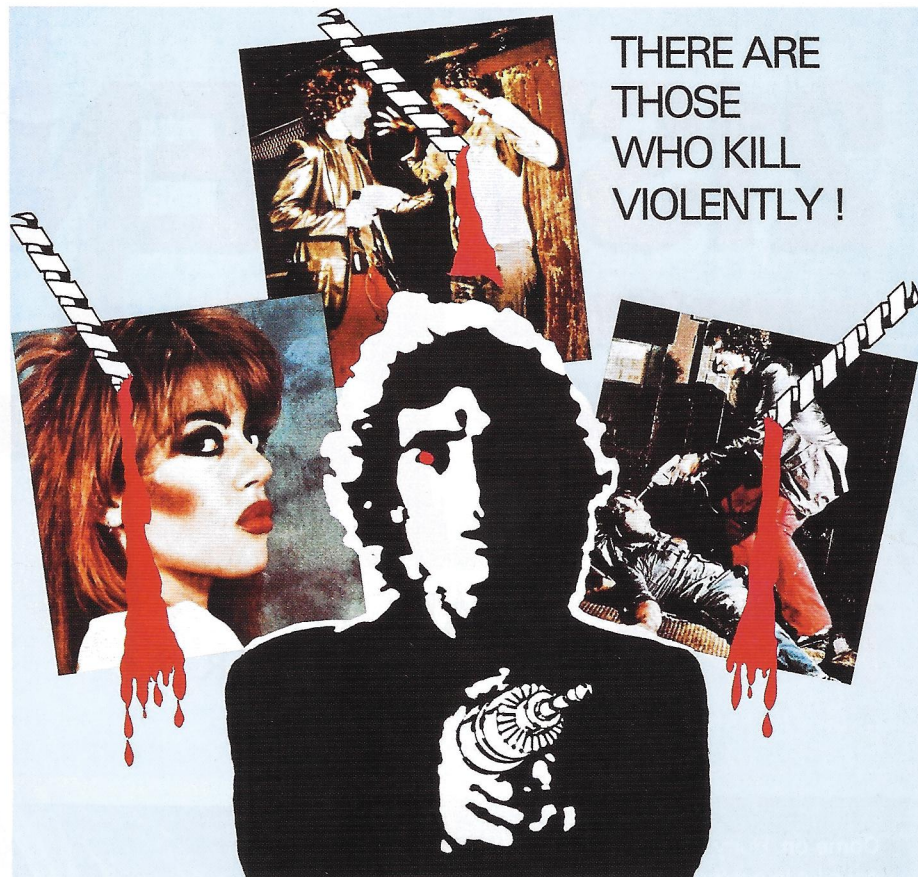


the grand scheme of the shoot getting an effect to work was of less concern than the fact that production were using a real drill throughout which the director brandished as he went on his rampage and on more than one occasion he came precariously close to injuring the actors with it. Quite what members of the public made about it all is anyone's guess as Ferrara ran around the streets with the drill and the crew even managed to get some people to stick around for some scenes – the old man waiting at the bus stop shortly before awful Abel and his drill turn up was one such person.

The film had initially been filmed on 16mm over a number of weekends, but it became clear they needed to up the ante on their shooting schedule. Ferrara and three other editors, including husband and wife Michael and Bonnie Constant who Ferrara had known from New York University, would edit the film whilst Orlando Gallini would work through the night on it. Eventually it was ready for release in 1979 where it did moderate business and the film made enough money to fund Ferrara's next film, Ms 45, a rape revenge drama which bought him some acclaim.

But Driller Killer, having been released in the US with little, if any outrage, found that it was a different story altogether in the UK where, in 1982, the film distributors for its video release took out full page ads using the image of the victim with a drill in the forehead and blood pouring down his face from the wound. Unsurprisingly the Advertising Standards Authority were deluged with complaints from the public and by 1984 it was effectively put on a banned list in the UK after the Video Recording Act came into being.

In the films defence, it was different to others in the slasher genre in so far as all the victims were male rather than scantily clad females, which was a prevalent feature in 70's horror and the killers motivation was driven by economics (he's unable to pay various bills) rather than sexual frustration. Ferrara's intention was that his killer was something of a Jekyll and Hyde character rather than an out and out unhinged lunatic. The film was banned for years in the UK owing to several of the scenes (the sex scene in the shower, the skinned rabbit being mutilated and obviously the drill to the forehead) which drew the censors ire and various edited versions were released in 1999, 2002, 2005. Finally at the end of 2016 the censors relented and the film was released uncut. By today's standards Driller Killer



THERE ARE
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DRILLER KILLER

This motion picture has been deemed TOO VIOLENT to be accorded a motion picture rating. There are no explicit sexual scenes. However, due to the violent nature of this film NO ONE UNDER 17 WILL BE ADMITTED WITHOUT BEING ACCOMPANIED BY A PARENT OR GUARDIAN.

ROCHELLE FILMS presents A NAVARON FILM PRODUCTION
Starring CAROLYN MARZ • JIMMY LAINE • BAYBI DAY
with BOB DE FRANK • PETER YELLEN • HARRY SCHULTZ
and featuring TONY COCA COLA AND THE ROOSTERS • Screenplay by NICHOLAS ST. JOHN
Music by JOSEPH DELIA • Director of Photography KEN KELSCH Sound J.P. MAC INTYRE
Executive Producer ROCHELLE WEISBERG • Produced by NAVARON FILMS • Directed by ABEL FERRARA

is more of a curiosity piece. It's oddly coloured bloodletting doesn't compare favourably to today's realistically gruesome horror films and it is really only its skull drill victim which has any visceral impact.

Though he went on to make Ms 45 and Fear City (which continued his sex tinged themes this time with strippers being hunted by a serial killer) Ferrara ended up working for a short time in TV directing two episodes of Miami Vice in 1985 and even doing a respectable pilot show with 1986's Crime Story all for Michael Mann before returning to feature films again with his own take on the Romeo and Juliet story in, China Girl.

Since Driller Killer and even Ms 45 Ferrara's never really embraced horror

in such explicit manner with only the mediocre 1993 version of Invasion of the Body Snatchers, his first studio project, which, though impressively bleak and downbeat, was a shadow of the two previous incarnations of the film. Perhaps 1995's The Addiction, a black and white vampire film, was nearer to his sensibilities but was far removed from the exploitative shenanigans of Driller Killer.

Instead having moved to Italy his last film was, Pasolini about the renowned Italian filmmaker starring Willem Dafoe in the lead role. It was a far cry from Ferrara's days running around the Bronx with a power drill in his hand and with his new found commitment to Buddhism it's unlikely he'll ever return to such thrilling drilling films ever again. ■