

The Stayler

CAST

SARAH KENDALL as Kay FREDERICK J. FLYNN as Eric CAROL KOTTENBROOK as Brooke ALAN MCRAE as David MICHAEL HOLMES as Marsh CARL KRAINES as The Slayer

CREW

Directed by J.S. CARDONE
Written by J.S. CARDONE and WILLIAM R. EWING
Produced by WILLIAM R. EWING
Executive Producer LLOYD N. ADAMS
Executive in Charge of Production ERIC WESTON
Director of Photography KAREN GROSSMAN
Edited by EDWARD SALIER
Music by ROBERT FOLK
Special Effects Makeup Creator ROBERT SHORT







IF SOMEONE ELSE SHOULD DIE, BEFORE I WAKE... DEMONS AND DREAM LOGIC IN "THE SLAYER"

by Lee Gambin

It's tempting to infer that late great horror pioneer Wes Craven was somehow inspired by J.S. Cardone's first directorial effort *The Slayer* — even if only in passing. Here is a remarkably unnerving horror outing that uses dreams and nightmares as its fundamental evil. It is as though Craven's *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984) is an inverted response to *The Slayer* — in his filmic lore, his victims fall vulnerable to the dream demon (Freddy Krueger) in sleep, whereas here in *The Slayer*, the film's protagonist jeopardises the safety of those around her if she succumbs to lurid and fatal slumber. Set on an isolated island and featuring a minimal cast, the film unfolds like a chamber play and bears a resemblance to fellow gore-soaked Canadian creep-show *Humongous* which was released the same year. However, this American production is more complicated than its north-of-the-border cousin and it doesn't play out like a traditional slasher film either; instead, it dips its deformed feet into the waters of dream logic and surrealism.

An inspired element of the creative construct and contextualisation in character development used in *The Slayer* comes in the fact that the principal, Kay (Sarah Kendall), is an artist. She is a painter, and is dedicated to abstract and surrealist art. This component is vastly important to the film's make-up and it stands sturdy in support of Kay's emotional and mental torment, because – for us the audience as well as the supporting players – it is easily accepted that Kay has a deep-rooted connection to the unconscious and the unexplainable. Kay is a "seer" who has an intuitive and perceptive link to the supernatural. She is completely in tune with apparent "otherworldliness", which all surfaces whilst in dream state.

In intelligent service to the film, director Cardone manages to successfully balance the dream logic aspect with a firmly stoic realism that keeps the film in a steady perspective — this is mainly because he chooses to move away from his leading lady and at times follow the rest of the small cast, giving the "tangible reality" an opportunity to breathe.



The surrealist aspect of the film is strengthened by the invested interest in the nondreamscape component: therefore, the film delivers the visceral scares within the realm of balance and well composed order. For example, in the scene wherein Kay's husband David (Alan McRae) is killed, he leaves his sleeping wife to explore the dimly lit house and scrutinise the surroundings. As tension builds and Cardone's camera stalks him, the sequence drifts between a comfortable airiness and a firm pragmatism. When the violence finally hits, it is served with sharp gusto - unflinching and unapologetic. The image of David's body being hung up with his neck compressed between two attic pull-doors is a satisfying roar in an almost dead silent build up. With his throat crushed and slowly making way to bodily severance, the visual of aushing blood spewing out of his mouth while his eves remain wide open in a state of shock is straight out of Kabuki – that gloriously visceral and influential style of Japanese opera. Killing off David first is also a nice brutality that the film employs, shaking its audience from a narrative-trapping rationale. After all, the film opens with David being the most vocal character as well as being the most proactive. spending the first moments of the film insisting that Kay gets ready to pack for a much deserved (and essential/therapeutic) holiday.

The neurotic Kay is reluctant to leave the house ("Maybe it's the wrong time to go away! Maybe we should wait!") and her paranoia and fear of escaping the "rat race" is made evident right from the beginning. She is terrified of being alone with her thoughts outside of the creative process and whilst the film presents Kay the artist as a "workoholic", it also validates why she is so completely consumed by her painting. Ultimately, her art seems to be the only outlet that helps. Kay is a woman traumatised and trapped by her dreams — and these nightmarish outings involve some psychic ability (she paints landscapes that she has never been to, but suddenly materialise in reality) and a connection to a monstrous demonic force that terrorises her. Stemming from a horrific experience in childhood which is eventually outed, Kay's harrowing dreams contribute to her inability to connect with David and act as the fundamental driving point that puts her nightmares to the fore of being the film's principal "evil".

When the film cuts to Kay's brother Eric (Frederick Flynn) and his wife Brooke (Carol Kottenbrook), who are joining Kay and David on the trip, the focus primarily remains on Kay. Brooke is not at all keen on spending time with her "nutsy" sister-in-law, while Eric eventually becomes the character to reveal the past trauma that complicates his feelings towards his sister. Regardless of Kay's detachment and the way she makes her husband and the others feel, the relationship between the two couples is profoundly and intimately intertwined, and this is heightened because they are isolated from the rest of the world as soon as they land in a closed-off environment.

Dropped off by Marsh (Michael Holmes), a creepy pilot who is presented as a red herring when the slayings commence, Kay experiences $d\acute{e}j\grave{a}$ vu on the deserted island ("This island is the sort of place folks dream about") as this is a place that she has painted — a painting inspired by her vivid dreams. Brooke is distressed and dissatisfied in another sense ("I don't need adventure, I need sidewalks..."), her urban pretensions penetrating the scenario, while the earthy men are comfortable in the ruins that surround the beach. Kay is distant, detached and stressed by her psychic connection to the newfound environs ("Don't you recognise that building? I painted that building...") while the film's engaging musical score ushers us into the vast oceanic habitat, which will eventually develop into a claustrophobic trap.

The main theme to the score is reminiscent of classic Universal horror, and this is not an overstatement. The music is memorable and maudlin, running throughout most of the picture. It is repeated but somehow never seems repetitive, much like the three-note cry for *The Wolf Man* (1941) by Charles Previn. This musical motif drives a dramatic penetrable force to the picture, and when it is used to accompany a passionate love-making scene shared by David and Kay, it is presented as therapy and as a healing force, akin to the famous Donald Sutherland/Julie Christie moment in *Don't Look Now* (1973). The score, composed by Robert Folk, does eventually shift gears, doing completely different things by the end of the movie when the only character remaining is the desperate and devastated Kay. Folk would also be the composer responsible for the gloriously elegant music in the lion-centric eco-horror film *Savage Harvest* (1981) from a year earlier.

Sarah Kendall's intense performance as Kay sings out an acute ability to play a woman perplexed by oppressive and maddening neurosis. The actress genuinely taps into the subgenre of horror being the "horror-of-personality", where her own choices as a performer manipulate the very notion that Kay herself could be the killer. Although she remains moody for most of the film. Kay is first seen smiling when her brother Eric tries to spook her about hurricanes. There is a connection to her brother that she doesn't seem to have with her husband ("Smile Kay! You're on vacation!"). Later her brother kisses her and tells her that he loves her with the camera lingering, bringing them close and evoking a strange intimacy. But their union is complicated and riddled with issues. Eric voices his disdain for surrealist and abstract art - he is a director of commercials, so therefore a slave to commercial "art" or what he considers to be something bankable and "real". He trivialises Kay's work and then later questions her sanity when he "lets the cat out of the bag", letting his wife know about a childhood Christmas where his parents gave Kay a kitten only to find it dead in their freezer days later. Eric believes Kay is mentally ill and destructive, while his wife Brooke goes from cold and unfeeling ("She needs a psychiatrist") to a nurturing force and a protector of the tormented young artist. One of the most dynamic and confronting



scenes has a frustrated and hysterical Eric try and force his sister to go to sleep. Kay screams and wails, refusing to succumb, while Brooke watches on in horror. This powerful image of the resistance to dream and the response to the trauma associated with slumber will be echoed two years later when Ronee Blakley will be insisting her daughter Heather Langenkamp get some sleep in Wes Craven's aforementioned classic and, much like that film and its many sequels, *The Slayer* showcases some cleverly constructed sequences that are multifaceted and alluring.

A fisherman autting trout on the shore is bludgeoned to death by a boat oar, and thus a perfect visual marriage between fish innards and his head splitting open is made. There is a sublime and disturbing image of Kay sitting in a rocking chair, trashing her drawings and waiting. With her fiery red hair (harkening back to a time of auburn haired witches) and her dead glare, it is a demonic image - an image of destruction and change - much like the wind-demon Pazuzu, used in *The Exorcist* (1973). Eric firing loud flares is reminiscent of the warding off of demons used in some Chinese festivals, so there is a commentary made in regards to a cultural juxtaposition where American westerners take on Eastern traditions (a culture thoroughly invested in the dream realm). The film's most dramatic death scene belongs to Brooke. She is stalked by a looming pitchfork and after smashing through glass she is stabbed through the back with the blades of the fork piercing through her chest. her breasts gushing with fresh blood. It is an outstanding image of bloody torture. Another wonderful image that matches the infamous horsehead scene from The Godfather (1972) has Kay waking from a nightmare where her husband's severed head is found in her bed, blood spilling from his eyes and mouth, making it a terrifically sharp and grotesque image that pollutes and perverts the supposed sanctity of marriage and monogamous intimacy.

When Kay is asleep and a slave to her nightmares, those around her are murdered, and while the film tips into the slasher model in the way it presents the killings, it uses somnambulism and filmic dreamscape while building upon an unconscious paranoia, past trauma and demonic entities to bash out the horror. "The Slayer" itself, with the heavy breathing and guttural growling, remains mostly unseen, which works for the "horror-of-personality" aspect of the film (is it a demon, or is it Kay?), and when the creature does appear it is an oozing beast straight from hell.

Critically scrutinised for its clunky pacing during its original release, the film doesn't waste time and uses what could be considered dragging points as an opportunity to deliver something interesting. For example, the entire sequence where Kay, Eric and Brooke try and find the recently killed David, that entire plot necessity doesn't overstay its welcome. And once complete, the film takes a nice stride setting itself up for the next visit from "The Slayer". David's disappearance launches an initial search and then carefully plotted varied

points where the characters are spotted trying to find him; therefore it works in a narrative scheme of things as well as adding a rigorous kinetic energy to the film.

One of the non-persecuted films from the video nasty era in the United Kingdom, *The Slayer's* climax is a phenomenal melting pot that dances between female-neurosis horror, the stalk 'n' slash trend that dominated the early eighties, supernatural demonic-themed monster fare and the complex and perpetually engaging "horror-of-personality" model.

Lee Gambin is a writer, author and film historian. He writes for various film related magazines and sites and has written the books Massacred by Mother Nature: Exploring the Natural Horror Film and We Can Be Who We Are: Movie Musicals of the 1970s. He will soon be releasing new books: The Howling Studies in the Horror Film, Nope, Nothing Wrong Here: The Making of Cujo and Tonight, On A Very Special Episode: A History of Sitcoms that Sometimes Got Serious. He also runs Melbourne based film society Cinemaniacs and lectures on cinema studies.





POSTCARDS FROM TYBEE

by Ewan Cant

Warning: the following article contains spoilers!

Surreal. That's the main word that comes to mind as I contemplate my surroundings. We're midway through shooting a location featurette for our upcoming release of *The Slayer*, and, during a brief pause in filming, I find myself standing alone on the top floor of the house in which troubled artist Kay and her three companions spend an ill-fated vacation. I'm in the very bedroom in which, some thirty minutes into the film, Kay and her moustachioed partner David make love as the melancholic Robert Folk score swells in the background, and the camera pans ominously into the mirror at the head of the couple's bed.

Today, some 37 years after the cameras rolled on *The Slayer*, the mirror in question (which, in the film's early scenes, prompts Brooke to refer to the bedroom as "definitely someone's playroom") is nowhere to be seen. But it's amazing to note what details remain; here are the same wood-panelled walls, the same brass lamps, the same green-painted French windows and, beyond these, of course, the same palm tree-fringed sea view – all elements that are sewn into the very fabric of a movie I discovered many years ago (and indeed, many miles away) as a burgeoning horror buff hunched eagerly in front of my parents' television set.

It is without exaggeration when I say that Joe Cardone's *The Slaye*r is a horror film that has long held a particular place in my heart. My first exposure to the movie came via an article in the UK's *The Dark Side* magazine, wherein writer John Martin offered up a brief synopsis of each of the so-called "video nasties", detailing the succession of gruesome atrocities that could be found within these movies.\[^1\] To my feverish young mind, weaned on a heady diet of rather more "safe" studio-backed fright fare such as *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, *Child's Play, Poltergeist* et al., this list presented itself as a veritable shopping list of illicit thrills. And, from that list, one of the first titles I would hit upon would be *The Slayer*.

By the time I had laid my hands on a copy of *The Slayer* around the late '90s, the whole video nasties debacle had been and gone, but its after-effects were still evident. In contrast

^{1 -} Those interested in the "video nasty" phenomenon are highly recommended to check out John Martin's essential tome on the subject, *The Seduction of the Gullible: The Curious History of the British "Video Nasties" Phenomenon* (Procrustes Press; First Edition 1993)



to today, overtly lurid titles such as *Cannibal Holocaust*, *Nightmares in a Damaged Brain* and *I Spit on Your Grave* remained banned outright, whilst other less ostensibly offensive fare such as *The Burning*, *The Bogey Man* and – you guessed it – *The Slayer*, found themselves neutered in one form or another. In the case of *The Slayer*, some 14 seconds would feel the sharp end of the censor's blade. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the prime (in fact, the only) casualty here was Brooke's death-by-pitchfork sequence, which was relieved of several frames of the prongs actually puncturing her chest, as well as the close-up on her face as she expires. blood pouring from her mouth.

Despite the British Board of Film Classification's (BBFC) best efforts to curb the impact of the film's aforementioned FX coup de grâce, *The Slayer* still delivered the goods. Even without its "money shot", the pitchfork scene remains a showstopper, whilst David's decapitation by trapdoor and Eric's death by fishhook, both of which were left entirely unscathed by the UK censor, are sufficiently lingering and mean-spirited. Even the early scene in which the poor fisherman is battered to death (there's got to be some sort of pun involving batter and fish in there somewhere?!) is gratifyingly abrupt and senseless, and it sets up the grim tone of the remainder of the film nicely.

In contrast to the more big-budget fright flicks that I'd consumed up until that point, *The Slayer* offered a genre experience that felt a little bleaker, a little more off-kilter, and, ultimately, a little more personal. With its washed-out aesthetic, its creeping sense of dread, its propensity towards dream (or should that be nightmare?) logic — more in keeping with its European genre peers than its US slasher brethren — Cardone's film truly felt like a step off the well-trodden horror path into the wilds of the genre. In contrast to the cinematic exploits of those celebrated poster boys of terror such as Freddy, Jason et al., here was something that felt like a singular find.

Of course, some two decades on from those formative viewing experiences and it's clear that *The Slayer*, far from being an obscurity, has built a sizeable fan base for itself amongst seasoned horror aficionados. After all, the new Blu-ray edition that you now hold in your hands is testament to that. But it hasn't always been an easy ride for *The Slayer*, and, aside from the fact that it's simply a very effective horror piece, we can perhaps attribute part of its cult status to its decidedly chequered distribution history.

Arriving in US theatres in 1982, just a little too late to capitalise on the slasher boom of 1980-81, *The Slayer* hardly set the box-office alight. Things didn't get any better when the film reached the home video market, finding itself trimmed down in the US and squeezed

onto a double-bill with Fred Olen Ray's *Scalps* (ironically, it was the incidental stuff that hit the cutting room floor; all the gore was left intact), whilst in the UK it was banned before being reissued in cut form as detailed above. An uncut UK DVD (never a US one) did eventually surface in 2001 via legendary label VIPCO³ – and, while the fact that it was finally available in its unexpurgated form was not something to be sniffed at, the muddy, full frame transfer left much to be desired.

Thankfully, unlike the narrative of the movie itself, the story of *The Slayer* was to have a happy ending. Now, thanks to the efforts of your ever-faithful fiends at Arrow Video, and with the precious support of the filmmakers, you can finally enjoy this unjustly obscure '80s chiller as it deserves to be seen — newly restored from a 4K scan of the original camera negative. And, whilst the film itself has never looked better, you'll hopefully be equally enthralled by the special features that we've put together for this release, which place a particular emphasis on *The Slayer's* shooting location — surely one of the film's leading stars.

Originally earmarked for filming on Catalina Island, just off the Californian coast near Los Angeles, *The Slayer* would ultimately lens on Tybee Island, a barrier island located in Chatham County, Georgia. Not nearly as remote as the filmmakers would have us believe, Tybee is about a thirty-minute drive from the historic city of Savannah (a town which was used, incidentally, for the filming of such other early '80s fright fare as Lucio Fulci's *Gates of Hell* [aka *City of the Living Dead*] and Ovidio Assonitis' *Madhouse* [aka *There Was a Little Girl*]).

Arriving in Tybee via US Highway 80, which morphs into Butler Avenue, the island's main thoroughfare, you'd be forgiven for thinking that you've landed on Amity Island. Above one of the first shops you pass, a huge replica of a great white, strung up as if freshly dredged from the ocean, looms down menacingly on prospective customers; a little further on, in a parking lot adjacent to another store, a giant shark's head (maw open wide to allow you to pose inside as if locked in its jaws) offers an irresistible roadside photo opportunity. Elsewhere, store window displays are filled with towels, body boards and other beach paraphernalia showing cartoon sharks, their snouts contorted in menacing grimaces. But don't be fooled, folks: Martha's Vineyard this isn't – we're on the trail of a creature feature of an entirely different persuasion.

There may be no man-eating sharks to terrorise our protagonists in *The Slayer*, but the island itself is hardly welcoming – Tybee, as depicted onscreen, presents a foreboding

^{2 - 14} seconds of cuts according to the BBFC website (http://bbfc.co.uk/releases/slayer-1992-0), 16 seconds according to the detailed breakdown at website Movie-Censorship - http://www.movie-censorship.com/report.php?ID=479878

^{3 -} Video Instant Picture Company (VIPCO), similarly discussed in my essay "In Search of *The Mutilator*", included in the accompanying booklet for Arrow Video's release of *The Mutilator*



landscape of windswept beaches, concrete forts, crumbling, derelict buildings and treacherous marshlands. Far from being what seasoned salesman Eric has apparently touted as "the next best thing to paradise", the surroundings which greet our doomed quartet appear distinctly inimicable.

In reality, Tybee at peak season is far closer to the exotic holiday idyll as pitched by Eric. Standing on the island's bustling pier this past Fourth of July weekend, contemplating the rows and rows of sunbathers stretching across the beach as far as the eye can see in either direction, whilst children splash happily in the surf, it's hard to reconcile the gloomy setting of *The Slayer* with the picture that lies before me. Nevertheless, if you look hard enough, the traces are there to be found...

One of the key locations to appear in *The Slayer*, and the one that is perhaps the most readily identifiable today (albeit dramatically refurbished), is the old abandoned theatre. Pictured first in one of Kay's paintings, then seen soon after "in the flesh" as our holidaymakers pass by it on their way to the beach house, and finally serving as the location for the discovery of David's headless corpse, the theatre has a pivotal role to the play in the film – cutting nearly as much of a menacing presence as that of "The Slayer" itself. With its foreboding "NO TRESPASSING" warning painted in white above the entrance, its torn-up, scattered seating dispersed carelessly around the main hall and its crumbling walls exposing aged brickwork beneath, the old theatre is every inch the archetypal horror movie location. Amazingly, the filmmakers used the building pretty much exactly as they found it, with barely any set dressing, bar the addition of a few cobwebs for a touch of oothic ambiance.

As dilapidated as the theatre appears in the film, *Slayer* fans will be happy (and perhaps more than a little surprised) to hear that the building was not bulldozed, nor did it fall down of its own accord, but instead has since undergone a remarkable transformation. Constructed in 1930 as a movie house to entertain soldiers billeted at the nearby Fort Screven, the Tybee Post Theater (which was later operated as the Beach Theater for a time) was forced to close its doors in the mid-1960s after it found itself unable to compete for trade with the new multiplexes appearing on the mainland. Falling into disrepair, the theatre would lie vacant for some thirty years – during which period the filmmakers of *The Slayer* would make good use of its run-down condition – before eventually being purchased, first by the Tybee Historical Society and later by a group of concerned local citizens, determined to see the building restored to its former glory. In 2015, that goal was realised when the building, now bearing its original name of the Tybee Post Theater, opened its doors to the public once again.⁴

of the doomed foursome's holiday home that hogs the screen time – from the demise of David, the first of the vacationers to succumb to The Slayer, to the fiery final appearance of the titular beast itself, the beach house is at the very nexus of the action. Early on in the planning of our location featurette, the task of locating the beach house – assuming that it still existed – seemed like a daunting one. Thankfully, owing to the assistance of the Savannah Film Commission, we managed to do just that!

Of course, whilst the old theatre has a prominent role to play in *The Slaver*, it's the location

Approaching the house from the road, it's surprising just how unrecognisable it is as the one which appears in *The Slayer*. Even as you make your way from the front door into the kitchen — which has been extensively remodelled since the shoot — the house is reluctant to give up its secrets. But take a few steps further, around the corner of the kitchen, and the beach house from *The Slayer* begins to take shape before your very eyes. Passing by the cabinets where Eric excitedly perused the booze selection, one of the few remaining features of the kitchen (the cabinets, not the booze!), you find yourself in the dining room, and directly faced with the door which, in the film at least, leads to the infamous basement. Disappointingly for those looking to re-enact David's final descent to confront The Slayer, the door in reality turns out to lead not to a dark, dank basement but a rather less creepy utility cupboard. As we learned from the house's owners, very few houses in Tybee are furnished with a basement, so the filmmakers were forced to look elsewhere for that feature. (Incidentally, we did eventually locate the actual basement with some much-valued local assistance.)

Phantom basement aside, *Slayer* fans will be happy to hear that the rest of the house offers much in the way of recognisable features. Heading upstairs from the dining room, you find yourself in the lounge where Kay and co. first enter the house and realise that, actually, it's not a bad place for a vacation after all. Here of course is the all-important front door where pilot/red herring Marsh delivers his fateful warning about a storm 'a-coming, as well where The Slayer eventually appears in all his blazing glory in the climactic scene. Head out through this door and down the rickety wooden steps (actually used for beach access rather than as an entrance) and you're afforded the classic perspective of the house as pictured in the lobby cards and, indeed, in the newly-commissioned artwork which adorns the cover of this release.

Last, but by no means least, the two upstairs bedrooms: the one, wherein Eric is pictured happily perusing his fishing magazine, unaware of the ironic fate coming his way; the other, in which Kay experiences her own *Godfather* moment as she pulls back the sheets to

^{4 -} For more information on the Tybee Post Theater, visit http://tybeeposttheater.org/

reveal her dead lover's severed head. The homeowners proudly informed me that they still possess the same bedsheets that were used in the film – although thankfully, they've been washed since... Speaking of which, our generous hosts Claire and the rest of the Reeve family deserve special mention for allowing (and, I daresay, *encouraging*) us to invade their home and poke cameras where we pleased – it's clear that *The Slayer* holds a special place in their hearts, too.

And that really is the entire <code>Slayer/Tybee</code> experience in microcosm — one of the things that never fails to delight me about this sort of low-budget, regionally-shot genre effort is the sense of community and local pride that often comes along with it. Speak to any of the Tybee residents who were around at the time the film was shot, or know of relatives that were — they all beam with the same enthusiasm on the subject, and delight in the fact that their little corner of the world has been immortalised on-screen. Such was the overwhelming feeling I got from those that attended our special screening of the film at the Tybee Post Theater, which you can happily relive on this very release. It's a moving sentiment, and one that's highly infectious — it makes films such as <code>The Slayer</code>, already so loved by genre fans such as you and I, all that more poignant and special. It puts that little bit of heart into the horror.

Ewan Cant is senior producer for Arrow Video, and has a penchant for obscure '80s slasher movies. He first saw The Slayer at around age 13, thanks to a very accommodating father, who thankfully had little scruples about such trivial things as "age ratings". Cheers dad!







ABOUT THE TRANSFER

The Slayer was exclusively restored by Arrow Films and is presented in its original aspect ratio of 1.85:1 with mono sound.

The original 35mm camera negative was scanned in 4K resolution on a pin-registered Arriscan at 0CN Digital. The film was graded and restored on the Nucoda grading system at R3store Studios, London. Thousands of instances of dirt, debris, scratches and other instances of film wear were repaired or minimised through a combination of digital restoration tools and techniques.

The original mono soundtrack was transferred from the optical negative at the BFI National Archive and was remastered at R3store Studios.

Restoration Supervised by James White, Arrow Films

The original film and audio elements for *The Slayer* were made available for this restoration by Eric Weston.

PRODUCTION CREDITS



