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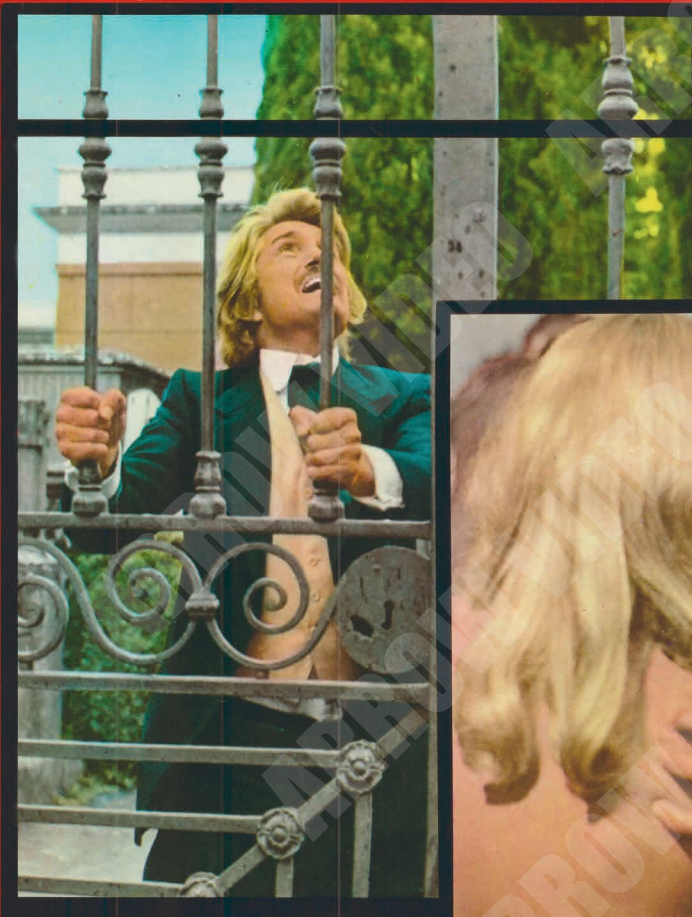
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CAST

Ewa Aulin Greta von Holstein
Klaus Kinski Dr. Sturges
Angela Bo Eva von Ravensbrück
Sergio Doria Walter von Ravensbrück
Giacomo Rossi Stuart Dr. von Ravensbrück
Luciano Rossi Franz, Greta's brother
Attilio Dottesio Inspector Dannick
Marco Mariani Simeon, the butler

CREW

Directed by **Aristide Massaccesi**
Story by **Aristide Massaccesi**
Screenplay by **A. Massaccesi, R. Scandariato** and **C. Bernabei**
Assistant Director **Romano Scandariato**
Director of Photography **Aristide Massaccesi**
Cameraman **Guglielmo Vincioni**
Assistant Cameraman **Gianlorenzo Battaglia**
Editors **Piera Bruni** and **Gianfranco Simoncelli**
Musical Score by **Berto Pisano**
Production Manager **Oscar Santaniello** (as **Oskar Santaniello**)
Production Assistants **Massimo Alberini** and **Sergio Rosa**
Sets and Costumes **Claudio Bernabei**
Make-up **Maria Grazia Nardi**



THE THOUSAND AND ONE DAYS OF ARISTIDE

by Stephen Thrower

Aristide Massaccesi, better known by his most frequent pseudonym 'Joe D'Amato', was an astoundingly prolific filmmaker who shot nearly two hundred films across 26 years. He began directing in the early 1970s, just as censorship was being relaxed in the major film markets. Consequently, as restriction gave way to greater freedom, two powerful forces came to dominate his cinema. The first was sex; the second was the urge to shock. His movies (and later his video productions) revelled in lust and animal passion, while his frequently gruesome output belonged to that notorious brand of Euro-horror in which the primary aim is to ravage and outrage the senses. When an interviewer remarked in 1991 that one of his films was "pretty brutal", Massaccesi answered simply, "Yes. I wanted to shock people."ⁱ

Although he lived to see his films become the object of cult adoration, Massaccesi was never remotely tempted to play the artist. He saw himself simply as a businessman, and his appetite for shock had one purpose: to make money. His approach was cheerfully cynical: he didn't use shocking imagery to 'shatter the facade of normality' or 'confront unpalatable truths', nor, he insisted, did he make films to unravel his own strange obsessions. Shock had one overwhelming value: it was a means to box-office gold. Despite his work combining sex and horror in increasingly disturbing ways, he remained resistant to suggestions of personal investment. Discussing the taboo-busting imagery of his most extreme films, he said, "I'm not really perverted. I only did that to shock people."ⁱⁱ

Yet for a director so resistant to 'art for art's sake', it seems there was one film which stood out – *Death Smiles on a Murderer* aka *Death Smiles at Murder* (*La morte ha sorriso all'assassino*, 1973). In his vast filmography, with its dozens of pseudonyms, it's the only one 'directed by Aristide Massaccesi'. As he explained on camera to the makers of *Joe D'Amato Totally Uncut 2* (1999): "The film was special, so I signed it with my own name. Just for the pleasure of putting my own name on a piece, you know?"ⁱⁱⁱ

ⁱ - Interview with Massaccesi by Axel Estein and Thomas Schweer, published in *Splating Image* #07, June 1991.

ⁱⁱ - *ibid.*

ⁱⁱⁱ - From *Joe D'Amato Totally Uncut 2* (1999), directed by Roger A. Fratter, released on DVD by Nocturno (Italy).



Life Before Death Smiles

The son of a chief electrician in the Italian film industry, Massaccesi was brought up around filmmakers, film studios, and movie-making equipment. He gained his first work experience at the tender age of 14 under the tutelage of Eugenio Bava (father of Mario), cutting out individual letters by hand for use in the opening and closing credits of films. From this he progressed to stills photographer, working on Jean Renoir's *The Golden Coach* (*Le carrosse d'or*, 1952), before graduating to assistant camera on such films as Carlo Lizzani's *L'oro di Roma* (1961), Mario Bava's *Hercules in the Haunted World* (*Erocle al centro della Terra*, 1961), Vittorio De Sica's *The Condemned of Altona* (*I sequestrati di Altona*, 1962), Giuseppe Patroni Griffi's *The Sea* (*Il mare*, 1963), and Jean-Luc Godard's *Contempt* (*Le mépris*, 1963). His first gig as director of photography, Piero Livi's *Pelle di bandito* (1969), was a black-and-white crime drama filmed in Sardinia, influenced by neorealism and cinema vérité. He shot it almost entirely hand-held, drawing on work he'd recently done for Michele Lupo on *Your Turn to Die* (*Troppo per vivere... poco per morire*, 1967) and *Seven Times Seven* (*Sette volte sette*, 1968), when he'd realised that the hand-held shots he was using for reasons of speed were actually more effective than the surrounding material. To minimise vibration from his body, he put together an apparatus involving handlebars to stabilise the camera; in effect an early form of steadicam. Hand-held shots would become a trademark of Massaccesi's later style, giving his often feverish and sleazy films even more visceral energy.

After *Pelle di bandito* came *Twisted Girls* (*L'isola delle svedesi*, 1969), a giallo-style thriller about jealous lesbian lovers on a Greek island. It was directed by Silvio Amadio, for whom Massaccesi had worked before as camera operator on *All the Other Girls Do!* (*Oltraggio al pudore*, 1964) and *For One Thousand Dollars Per Day* (*Per mille dollari al giorno*, 1966). Evidently impressed, Amadio booked him again as cinematographer for his next film, a dark-hued mystery-romance called *Disperatamente l'estate scorsa* (1970). Now firmly established as a cinematographer, Massaccesi accepted a stream of spaghetti western assignments, and three giallo films; Massimo Dallamano's *What Have You Done to Solange?* (*Cosa avete fatto a Solange?*, 1971), Nello Rossati's *The Cat in Heat* (*La gatta in calore*, 1972), and Alberto De Martino's *The Killer Is on the Phone* (*L'assassino... è al telefono*, 1972).

For many years, fans believed that *Death Smiles on a Murderer*, released in 1973, was Massaccesi's first film as director. In fact, he kicked off his directing career in the early months of 1972, with a spaghetti western called *Go Away! Trinity Has Arrived in Eldorado* (*Scansati... a Trinità arriva Eldorado*). An ultra-cheap project, shot in five days, it was more of a lark than a serious debut, combining a jokey attitude and a lot of stock footage from

other spaghetti westerns. Massaccesi declined a director's credit to avoid affecting his bookings as a cinematographer, as he explained to film journalist John Martin: "I was still working as a director of photography, and I wanted to keep that work up, because it was my bread and butter. But a director like, let's say Alberto De Martino, would not be happy to have another director working on his film."^{iv} Consequently, the directing credit went to producer Diego Spataro aka 'Dick Spitfire'. (Spataro had used the 'Spitfire' pseudonym before, on a western he'd co-directed with Demofilo Fidani.)

Massaccesi's second film as director was *Sollazzevoli storie di mogli gaudenti e mariti penitenti* ('Amusing tales of pleasure-loving wives and penitent husbands'), a three-part portmanteau film modelled (as were many at the time) on Pier Paolo Pasolini's 1971 hit *The Decameron* (*Il Decameron*). Once again Massaccesi gave away the director's credit, this time to his friend and assistant director Romano Scandariato, aka 'Romano Gastaldi'. The film opened in Rome in August 1972 but failed to find much success.

Undeterred, Massaccesi followed it with another 'decamerotic', *Le mille e una notte di Boccaccio a Canterbury* ('The thousand and one nights of Boccaccio in Canterbury'), which cheekily incorporated references to all three of Pasolini's 'Trilogy of Life' films. It was shot in 1972, and announced to the trade the same year, but thanks to problems with the Italian censor, who demanded three re-submissions, it didn't come out until December 1974, by which time the vogue for such films was over. One man who was not very sympathetic was Pasolini himself, whose irritated remarks in *La Stampa* – "They copy my movies before they even come out!" – alluded to the fact that when *Le mille e una notte di Boccaccio a Canterbury* was announced as complete, Pasolini's *Arabian Nights* (*Il fiore delle mille e una notte*, 1974) was still in pre-production!^v Massaccesi may have pissed off Pasolini, but the award-winning Italian journalist Enzo Biagi was grudgingly impressed, commenting: "They are shooting a film that is a condensation [of Pasolini's 'trilogy of life'] called *The Thousand and One Nights of Boccaccio in Canterbury*, I can just imagine what's to be expected, but the inventor of the title is a genius."^{vi} Sadly, by the time the film was released the title had been changed to *Novelle licenziose di vergini vogliose* ('Licentious Tales of Horny Virgins'), and Massaccesi was hiding behind yet another pseudonym, 'Michael Wotruba'. ("There was a period in Italy where East European directors were in vogue, so I called myself 'Michael Wotruba' for a while, purely as a marketing move."^{vii})

iv - Interview with Aristide Massaccesi by John Martin: "Hampstead Smiles On A Murderer... My Breakfast With Joe D'Amato", retrieved from houseoffreudstein.wordpress.com, 19 January 2018.

v - Pier Paolo Pasolini, quoted in *La Stampa*, 28 September 1972, p24, "Il padrono di famiglia".

vi - Enzo Biagi, in *La Stampa*, 4 January 1973, p3: "Dicono di lei Pasolini".

vii - Interview with Aristide Massaccesi by John Martin: "Hampstead Smiles On A Murderer... My Breakfast With Joe D'Amato". Retrieved from houseoffreudstein.wordpress.com, 19 January 2018.



Next in Massaccesi's 'hidden filmography' was *God Is My Colt .45 (La colt era il suo Dio, 1972)*, a western credited to Luigi Batzella which Massaccesi apparently co-directed. It was followed by *Bounty Hunter in Trinity (Un bounty killer a Trinità, 1972)*, a western directed by Massaccesi but credited to 'Oskar Faradine' aka Oscar Santaniello, his friend and production manager. Santaniello went on to work as production manager on numerous Massaccesi films, including *Death Smiles on a Murderer, Beyond the Darkness (Buio Omega, 1979)*, *Antropophagus (1980)*, and *Erotic Nights of the Living Dead (Le notti erotiche dei morti viventi, 1980)*. *Diary of a Roman Virgin (Diario di una vergine romana, 1973)*, credited to 'Michael Wotruba', a late-entry peplum with erotic undertones, brought the tally of films secretly (and solely) directed by Aristide Massaccesi to five in the space of a single year! No wonder he is so often compared to the hyper-prolific Spanish cult director Jess Franco...

Massaccesi Smiles at Murder

Massaccesi's next film as director, *Death Smiles on a Murderer*, began shooting on the 13th of November 1972. According to co-writer and production designer Claudio Bernabei, it took somewhere in the region of seven or eight days, which, if true, is phenomenally quick for such a handsome picture.^{viii} Sadly it was not successful in Italy, on its release in July 1973, but its piquant recipe – gothic atmosphere heavily spiced with graphic violence – makes it stand out when looked at today, as does Massaccesi's decision to sign it with his own name. While it may in truth have been his sixth film, *Death Smiles on a Murderer* has all the amusingly excessive hallmarks of a cinematographer's first taste of the big chair. Cannily spotting that the horror genre was a godsend for technique-obsessed filmmakers, Massaccesi gave himself permission to film in whatever manner he pleased, using all the toys of the cinematographer's arsenal: wide-angle lenses, fish-eye lenses, steep camera angles, slow motion, lens flare, soft-focus, shots through foliage; the film is a riot of baroque visual flourishes. As for the violence: frankly, if you were not already gripped by the strangeness and disorientation which Massaccesi conjures, the moment when Klaus Kinski plunges a needle into Ewa Aulin's unblinking eye ought to fix this film forever in your memory.

In terms of storytelling, Massaccesi is a tad too casual about the timeline, and in too much haste to jump from one strange event to another. Consequently, narrative logic is frayed and unreliable – which frankly matters not, since the film's oddball delirium is a finer reward than a banal dish of common sense. The first half-hour is composed with such peculiar emphases, and such lack of structural ballast, that we can't even say who the central characters are going to be. For instance, it eventually transpires that the intense young man in the opening scenes is not the tortured central character he seemed so likely to be; and

viii - Claudio Bernabei, quoted in *Italian Gothic Horror Films, 1970–1979* (p92) by Roberto Curti (McFarland, 2017).

the doctor, played by the great Klaus Kinski, is a non-sequitur whose involvement in the plot, despite spectacular activities here and there, is structurally insignificant. This, despite the character being granted a voice-over explaining his motivations and inner thoughts! (Massaccesi later admitted that his original story was weak and the script full of holes, which led to frantic rewrites during the shoot.)

Massaccesi would soon become notorious for his scenes of brutal violence, with films like *Emanuelle in America (1977)*, *Beyond the Darkness*, *Anthropophagous* and *Absurd (Rosso Sangue, 1981)* pushing the envelope for ghastly spectacle. Not to be outdone, *Death Smiles on a Murderer* sees him leaping into grisly third gear from a standing start. The unfortunate driver who crashes a horse-drawn carriage in the first few minutes of the film ends up impaled on a wheel axle, with his guts squelched outwards by the errant woodwork; the needle shoved in Greta's eye is as shocking as anything in Italian exploitation, and that includes the films of Lucio Fulci; a gory cat attack ends with the victim's eyes glopping out onto his cheeks like bloody oysters; a man is nailed to a door by a giant spike; a victim's face gets the famous 'pizza from hell' effect so popular in later Italian horrors like *Nightmare City (Incubo sulla città contaminate, 1980)*; and there are sundry drownings, beatings and strangulations too. Presiding over it all is the spectral corpse of Greta, a cadaver whose charnel house grin and hideous complexion anticipate the zombie films of the early 1980s.

Life After Death Smiles

In 1973 Massaccesi was director of photography on the gothic horror opus *The Devil's Wedding Night (Il plenilunio delle vergini, 1973)*, a film credited onscreen to Luigi Batzella. According to producer Franco Gaudenzi, however, Massaccesi co-directed the film ("Actually they made it together, he [Batzella] made him reshoot some things, not the least because Aristide had an important role in the crew."^{ix}) Observing Massaccesi's technical skill, and his ability to shoulder the production when necessary, actor Mark Damon recommended him to his friend Roger Corman, which led to Corman hiring Massaccesi to photograph *The Arena* (Steve Carver, 1974), which again Massaccesi is rumoured to have co-directed.^x

Some critics have fallen into error by suggesting that 1973's *Diary of a Roman Virgin* was 'the first Joe D'Amato film', but they're mixing it up with a re-release called *Livia, una vergine per l'impero*, for which video-generated credits with the 'Joe D'Amato' pseudonym were added. *Diary* was originally a 'Michael Wotruba' film, as can be seen from its original poster and locandina. In a very real sense, 'Joe D'Amato' didn't exist until 1975, when Aristide Massaccesi noticed that many of the most successful American directors

ix - Franco Gaudenzi, quoted in *Italian Gothic Horror Films, 1970–1979*, (p98) by Roberto Curti (McFarland, 2017).
x - *ibid.*



(Scorsese, Coppola, De Palma) were Italian-Americans: "We saw the name 'D'Amato' on a sexy calendar, so that was it," he explained. He first used the name on his violent and erotic revenge movie *Emanuelle e Françoise (Le sorelline)* (1975), and the rest, as they say, is history.

Aristide Massaccesi died of a heart attack on 23 January 1999, in the Monterotondo Hospital near Rome. He was 62. He had just returned from Las Vegas, where he'd been filming a porn version of Paul Verhoeven's *Showgirls* (1995). Although he died relatively young, it seems that he was happy and energetic right up to the end. As he told *La Stampa* at Cannes in 1998, just eight months before his death: "I sold the seven films I made this year around the world, I'm about to leave for a new film that I'll shoot in Hungary, an erotic story about pirates. And soon my films from the 1970s will be released on newsstands: *Emanuelle nera (Black Emanuelle)* and so on: a series of my films alone, an honour that Truffaut and a few others have had."^{xi} His reference to Truffaut was no doubt deeply sardonic, but thanks to his taste for giving an audience what they want – lashings of sex, twisted perversions, and stomach-churning violence – he is assured a long and celebrated 'afterlife' beyond even those newsstand videos; on DVD and Blu-ray, and streaming video no doubt, for many years to come.

Musician and author Stephen Thrower has written extensively on horror, alternative and cult cinema, with books including Nightmare USA: The Untold Story of the Exploitation Independents (FAB Press, 2008), Eyeball Compendium (FAB Press, 2003) and Beyond Terror: The Films of Lucio Fulci (FAB Press, 1999).

^{xi} - Massaccesi, quoted in *La Stampa*, 22 May 1998, p27, "Due italiani trionfano col porno".





THE ANGEL ENDS WHERE THE DEVIL BEGINS

SHOOTING DEATH SMILES ON A MURDERER

by Roberto Curti

Having taken his first steps in the Italian film industry in the early 1950s, at only 14, two decades later Aristide Massaccesi was one of the most esteemed cameramen and directors of photography in the business. According to director Alberto De Martino, "Aristide didn't talk nonsense, he knew how to do his job, and he was quick. It took him a couple of seconds to understand how to light a scene. And whenever he was in trouble with the lighting, he would take the camera in his own hands." Massaccesi's grip on the camera was so firm that he could make a hand-held shot look like a dolly, as he did on De Martino's *Counselor at Crime (Il consigliere)*, 1973. Taking the big step and becoming a film director, like many of his colleagues had done, was something Aristide both dreamed and dreaded, as he was afraid that other directors would no longer need his services as director of photography. Consequently, as mentioned in the previous piece, several of his earliest films were helmed without Massaccesi signing them as director.

A key role in Massaccesi's early career as director was played by producer Franco Gaudenzi. A go-ahead business consultant who worked with many people in the movie business, Gaudenzi had set up his own company and started buying and distributing films, and then began to produce them on his own. Massaccesi met him in early 1972 through production manager Oscar Santaniello, and the two got along well together, personally and professionally. Gaudenzi asked Massaccesi (officially acting only as d.o.p.) to assist Luigi Batzella and co-direct *The Devil's Wedding Night (Il plenilunio delle vergini)* a vampire movie starring Mark Damon and Rosalba Neri shot in Summer of 1972 and produced by Virginia Cinematografica, a company which Massaccesi was part of. The time had come: on his next directing job, also produced by Gaudenzi, Aristide would use his own name.

Death Smiles on a Murderer started life as a one-page long, bare-bones synopsis entitled *Sette strani cadaveri* ('Seven Strange Corpses'), which Massaccesi turned into a script, sharing the credit with Scandariato and Claudio Bernabei. As Scandariato recalled, "we split the job between the two of us, I wrote several scenes, he wrote several others... for instance, the scene with Ewa Aulin and the parrot, that was totally mine... Bernabei was



the typist, and we put his name on the script so as not to pay him (laughs).” *Seven Strange Corpses* borrowed the premise from Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu’s *Carmilla* and added a number of elements taken from the works of Edgar Allan Poe, namely *The Black Cat* and *The Masque of the Red Death*. In tune with many Italian Gothics of the previous decade, an elusive literary source was brought up: an article in the January 1973 issue of *Playmen* mentioned a novelette by a “Herbert Peuckardt” which, according to the article, had also been the inspiration for one of Marlene Dietrich’s first films.

For the leading role, Gaudenzi cast the then-23-year-old Ewa Aulin as Greta, in one of her last film roles. The days of A-grade pictures such as the Tinto Brass giallo *I Am What I Am* aka *Deadly Sweet* (*Col cuore in gola*, 1967) and Christian Marquand’s *Candy* (1968) were gone, and the Swedish actress was growing so dissatisfied with her film career that she would soon retire. The cast also featured one of the most familiar faces in Italian genre cinema of the 1960s, Giacomo Rossi Stuart, the hero of Mario Bava’s masterpiece *Kill... Baby, Kill!* (*Operazione paura*, 1966), plus other reliable actors such as Sergio Doria (seen in Riccardo Freda’s *The Iguana with the Tongue of Fire* [*L’iguana dalla lingua di fuoco*, 1971] and in Romolo Guerrieri’s *The Double* [*La controfigura*, 1971]), Fernando Cerulli, Marco Mariani, Pietro Torrisi and the weird-looking Luciano Rossi, the latter in one of his typically demented-looking appearances as the incestuous Franz von Holstein. The sultry Angela Bo was one of the many starlets of the “Decamerotics”, and her short career comprised such works in that genre such as *Canterbury proibito* (1972) and *Curse of the Red Butterfly* (*Quando i califfi avevano le corna...*, 1973). Ewelin Melcheric, the costume designer in several Massaccesi films, played the uncredited key role of Gertrud the maid; around that time, she and the director were romantically attached.

On top of that, Gaudenzi and Massaccesi managed to have Klaus Kinski on hand for one of the actor’s customary “special participation” roles that resulted in his name in prominent view on posters for a handful of minutes’ screen time. As the director recalled, “Kinski did everything just for the money. You called him for two days, gave him lots of dough ... a true prostitute, pure and simple. But I must say that he always gave you something more, because he really got into the character, maybe because of an inner vein of madness, not even in a lucid way. He was fascinated with playing a half-lunatic in my film, and gratified by the idea of acting over the top in a movie. So, working with him was a real pleasure.”

According to the official production papers, filming took place between November 11 and December 18, wrapping just three days after Aristide’s 36th birthday, on a budget of about 150 million lire. However, those who took part in it claim that the actual shooting time was much shorter. Claudio Bernabei maintains that the movie was shot in just seven or eight days, but a more likely figure would be two or three weeks at the most. The outdoor scenes were filmed at Palazzo Patrizi in Castel Giuliano, near Bracciano, whereas the indoor scenes

were shot at Villa Parisi in Frascati, a recurring location in Italian Gothics, seen in Mario Caiano’s *Nightmare Castle* aka *Night of the Doomed* (*Amanti d’oltretomba*, 1965), the early gothic-giallo hybrids *The Third Eye* (*Il terzo occhio*, 1966) and *The Murder Clinic* (*La lama nel corpo*, 1966), as well as in Mario Bava’s gialli *Hatchet for the Honeymoon* (*Il rosso segno della follia*, 1970) and *A Bay of Blood* (*Reazione a catena*, 1971).

According to Scandariato, the script was much more suspenseful than the finished film, and characterized by a more developed mystery angle, but many things were altered during shooting. One notable addition was the erotic element. Scandariato claimed that he was flabbergasted when he first saw the rough cut and discovered that several ideas that had been merely suggested on paper, such as the attraction between Ewa Aulin’s character, conceived as an embodiment of Death, and the woman who invites her into her house, had mutated into rather explicit sex scenes. The sapphic interlude between Ewa Aulin and Angela Bo was one of the two scenes (the other being Bo and Sergio Doria’s lovemaking sequence) that the board of censors demanded be trimmed, for a total of approximately 21 seconds, in order to give the film a screening certificate with a V.M.18 rating.

As so often in Italian genre cinema, many ideas were improvised on the set. This was the case with the sequence set in the “changing room” with veils and cobwebs, which elegantly hints at the passage of time. Others were achieved through decidedly pragmatic means: the one where Luciano Rossi is viciously attacked by a cat was costing Massaccesi unplanned extra shooting time after a number of unsuccessful attempts. Gaudenzi was desperate. Eventually the director achieved the desired effect in the easiest and boldest possible way: he just threw the feline against Rossi’s face, and filmed the scene with an extra camera to boot.

Other last-minute choices on the part of the director were dictated by diverse issues. For the scene in which Kinski’s character, a doctor obsessed with experiments aimed at reviving the dead, reanimates a corpse, the extra on the operating table was Luciano Rossi’s agent Antonio Aschini, better known as Tony Askin. Knowing Kinski’s erratic behavior, Massaccesi was understandably worried that the actor would harm the unfortunate extra. He turned to Askin, who was on the set as a visitor, and asked him: “Will you play the corpse for me? I wouldn’t want anything bad to happen...” While Kinski pretended to stick a needle into his body, Askin had to operate offscreen a syringe filled with stage blood in order to make the shot more realistic—which, due to bad timing, resulted in Kinski’s face splashed in red. The actor didn’t bat an eyelid. Kinski’s method acting also ended up making this one of the few scenes that required multiple takes, as he kept requesting that the mysterious hands strangling him (belonging to Pietro Torrisi) grasp his neck more tightly: take after take, Kinski’s face turned from pink to cyanotic blue.



The working title *Seven Strange Corpses* was eventually changed by the distributor to *Death Smiles on a Murderer*, in order to follow the thread of films with the word "death" in the title, such as Luciano Ercoli's gialli, *Death Walks in High Heels* (*La morte cammina coi tacchi alti*, 1971) and *Death Walks at Midnight* (*La morte accarezza a mezzanotte*, 1972), whereas Scandariato would have preferred the more allusive *L'angelo finisce dove comincia il diavolo* ('The Angel Ends Where the Devil Begins'), a quote from Pope Paul VI. Released on July 11, 1973, the movie did scarce business in Italy, earning slightly more than 70 million lire, partly because Gaudenzi had to rely on regional distributors, since no important distribution company agreed to pick it up due to its unknown director. Perhaps this was one of the reasons why Massaccesi would never sign a film under his own name again, and instead relied on various aliases, the most notorious being Joe D'Amato. It would take six years for him to return to the horror genre with *Beyond the Darkness* (*Buio Omega*, 1979).

Even though in later interviews the director dismissed *Death Smiles on a Murderer* as naïve, he was quite satisfied with the film. "At the end of the shooting, Aristide told me: 'See, now I want to make movies in earnest...'" Scandariato recalled. "We talked about it at length, and he told me he wanted to try and make a "real" movie, not one shot in two or three weeks, but in the time it takes to tell a good story, with good lighting. 'I want to show myself and others that I can do it.'" Over the course of his career he never managed to fulfill this dream, but with *Death Smiles on a Murderer* Aristide Massaccesi definitely showed that, indeed, he could direct.

Roberto Curti is the author of Italian Gothic Horror Films, 1970-1979 as well as other books and essays on Italian cinema. He lives in Cortona, Italy.





AN INTERVIEW WITH ROMANO SCANDARIATO

This previously unpublished interview with the scriptwriter and assistant director of *Death Smiles on a Murderer* was conducted by Manlio Gomasasca, of *Nocturno* magazine, in July 1995. The interview has been newly transcribed and translated by the interviewer for this edition.

Please can you tell me how and when you started working with Aristide Massaccesi?

We met for the first time in Sardinia. We were both working on the same film; I was the assistant director and Aristide was the camera operator. Then we met again by chance at Istituto Luce [an Italian production and distribution film company formed in 1924]. We were both busy working, but we got together, and he asked for my help on a project that two producers, Diego Spataro and Massimo Berardi, were developing. It was a western called *Trinity Has Arrived in Eldorado* (*Scansati... a Trinità arriva Eldorado*, 1972) which was mostly made with recycled footage. After that one, we worked together for another 'recycled footage' film, another western called *Bounty Hunter in Trinity* (*Un bounty killer a Trinità*, 1972), starring Nino Scarciofolo [Jeff Cameron] and a group of stuntmen including the retired boxer Enzo Pulcrano; Enzo worked with me again as stunt coordinator on *Violent Rome* (*Roma violenta*, 1975).

What can you tell me about Aristide Massaccesi as a person?

Aristide was a really nice guy; very outgoing, funny and always full of ideas. And he had constant brainwaves, such as the concept of the 'room of time past' in *Death Smiles on a Murderer*, a room covered entirely by cobwebs. It wasn't featured in our screenplay, but he had this idea overnight and filmed it.

Tell me more about *Death Smiles on a Murderer*...

That was a really good film, but the title chosen for its release was terrible. Back then there were other titles featuring 'Death' in the title, such as *Death Walks on High Heels* (*La morte cammina coi tacchi alti*, 1971) and *A Black Veil for Lisa* (*La morte non ha sesso*, 1968) and they were all box-office hits. So, the producers decided to go with the flow and release it with that title; it didn't help the film commercially.



How did you and Aristide work together on that film?

We wrote the script for *Death Smiles on a Murderer* together and I was the assistant director for most of the shooting, but I also had a previous engagement, so I left before the film was finished. They added a lot of sexually explicit sequences that were not in the original script. When I saw the film for the first time in a theatre I literally jumped on my seat. When we wrote it, the film was not so erotic - the undead woman was supposed to be mostly a mischievous entity, but nothing was meant to be too explicit. In the script, even the lesbian subplot was played mostly by glances. I mean it was a completely different film onscreen from what we had written.

Is it true that you both drew inspiration for the script from the novella *Carmilla* by Sheridan Le Fanu?

That's not correct. We wrote the script without any references in mind. The basic story outline, just one page long, was entirely Aristide's. It's possible that he was influenced by some other source. While writing the script, we both came up with some ideas that we jotted down on our own; then we met and worked them out together. For example, the idea of the parrot was mine, and mine alone. It was supposed to enhance the giallo or suspense elements of the story. You couldn't guess who was really talking to whom in the script, it was supposed to be a mystery within a mystery. In the end, Aristide had to get rid of some of those sequences, probably due to production demands. Anyway, the suspense elements were pretty strong during the party sequence or in the scene in the crypt, with the cat lunging at the character. That was a perfect jump-scare.

If I remember correctly you also worked with Aristide for some "Decamerotic" films as an assistant director...

That's correct. We made three of those films together. Two of them were directed by him and I was the director of the third, the one called *Fra' Tazio da Velletri* (1973). The shooting began on December 1972 and it was completed at the end of January 1973. To be more precise, the actual shooting began in December, then he had to take some time off and we continued the shooting after January 17th. The reason for this was a contractual obligation that Aristide had with the producers of *Death Smiles on a Murderer*. He had to deliver three films in a year, for which he was paid a lump sum. Therefore, he had to direct *Fra' Tazio da Velletri* as well, with me as assistant director, but he had some unexpected problems before the shooting, so I took his place during the first weeks of shooting. One day, one of the producers told Aristide, "You know what? Since you're never around, Romano's going to complete the film and he's going to be credited as director." He was okay with it and I got my first full credit as a director, under the name of Romano Gastaldi, because my full name is Romano Gastaldi Scandariato di San Gaudenzio.

Death Smiles on a Murderer is the only film in a vast filmography in which Aristide Massaccesi is credited with his real name. Do you think there's a personal reason behind this choice?

I guess that's because it was the first time in his career that Aristide felt confident enough to prove to everybody that he could be a serious film director. I mean, he came up with visual solutions that were really ahead of the time. I think the sequence in the veiled room is proof of that, and it wasn't even scripted. He came up with that idea overnight. I remember that once we had completed that film, Aristide told me, "I don't want to make cheap movies anymore... I want to be a serious filmmaker." It's a shame that he never fulfilled his intention, mostly for monetary issues.

How did you continue your career after your partnership with Aristide?

They offered me to direct *Zombie Holocaust* aka *Doctor Butcher M.D. (Zombi Holocaust, 1980)*, which I originally wrote under the title of *The Queen of Cannibals*. The script was green-lit but I was more interested in working on another film, *The Fascist Jew (Prima della lunga notte - L'ebreo fascista, 1980)*. When I was done with that, I joined the crew of *Zombie Holocaust* halfway through the shoot. A lot had been changed from my original script, and that was a shame. Marino Girolami was a great director, who never got the recognition nor the financing that he deserved.

Please can you tell me more about your experience with *Zombie Holocaust*?

That film was almost entirely shot at the Circeo National Park (about 80 km south of Rome, by the coast). When I joined the crew, beside my regular job as assistant director, I was also acting as stunt coordinator for the action scenes. One of the things that I remember vividly was something that happened with the make-up and special effects department. It was something that in my opinion was almost surreal. We had to shoot the surgical procedure sequence. For that, as it was almost customary at the time, we used a lot of pigskin. You know, if you shave pigskin completely, it looks exactly like human skin. For the internal organs, we ordered four full sets of pig innards and offal, including hearts, because a pig's heart is almost identical to a human heart. When the effects guy had prepped the dummy, we started shooting the scene with a nice close-up of the scalpel opening the body and then... we found pulled pork inside! The effects guy had minced all the innards and the heart because he was afraid of a bulging effect. Can you believe it? The result was beyond terrible. And the guy is still considered to be one of our best make-up artists. Go figure!



Please tell me more about the other films you directed...

The most famous one is without doubts *Quel ragazzo della curva B* (1987). The story was inspired by a real character, whose name is Gennaro Palummella, and he had a cameo role in the film. But he was such a handful... He was the head of the supporters of Napoli Football Club and from time to time he rebelled against me and the crew. I yelled "Action!" and his guys were initially sticking to script, singing the theme song, written and sung by Nino D'Angelo (a local Neapolitan pop star and celebrity) who was playing the main character in the film, but after a while they started chanting another local anthem about Maradona. Of course, the whole sequence turned into a terrible mess. Originally the film was to be directed by Nino D'Angelo, with me acting as director's coach, but he got tired of it pretty soon. I was reluctant, but I took his place as the film's director and I still regret this personal choice, because for the first time in my career I had to compromise. The shooting script was delivered to me one page a day, sometimes on an hourly basis. It was a complete mess from the start. Of course, there was already a finished script when we started shooting, but I had pages rewritten every day because I wasn't happy with it. My only idea that survived, and I had to fight for it, was to replace the usual Camorra gangsters with a real group of young stadium drug pushers. Nino was reluctant to be in the film as well, even though he was the main character. For some sequences we had to use a body double, and he also refused to sing because he was clashing with the producers. I mean, we had all sorts of problems! I remember that, at some stage, the film was supposed to feature Maradona himself in a cameo role, but he asked for an exorbitant amount of money (the equivalent of \$2.5 million). Then they chose another superstar football player, Omar Sivori, but the deal didn't go through. In the end, the film featured other players that weren't so famous; they were Bruscolotti, Pesaola, Carnevale and Giordano. I have to say that they were really collaborative, especially Giordano who was a really decent and funny guy. Even though he had no previous acting experience, he improvised and was surprisingly effective in one of the key sequences of the film, the one where the champion tries to cheer up Nino after he's been dumped by his girlfriend.

What can you tell me about *The Titbit (Il bocconcino, 1976)*?

The Titbit is very close to my heart and the first film that I directed without using a pseudonym. I wrote a series of short stories called *All the Opportunities That I Missed*. It was a collection of "what if" stories and situations that really happened to me. The producer of *Rudeness (Lo Sgarbo, 1975)* really liked those stories and asked me to squeeze them into a coherent script. The original title for the script was *La Cuginetta*, but I couldn't find enough funds to make it into a film. Back then, *Malicious (Malizia, 1973)* was yet to be released and that kind of film was not very popular. The first person I submitted the script to

was the producer of *Death Smiles on a Murderer* but he wasn't interested. After *Malicious* came out and became a box-office sensation, he called me back while I was already in post-production, telling me that he wanted to reduce my script. It was too late, of course, because the film was almost finished and sold to another company. *The Titbit* was financed thanks to a friend of mine, a production designer that convinced a producer from Milan, Mr. Corti (the owner of Icet Studios), to read my script. He liked it and green-lit the film. The budget was really low, so we had to hire mostly beginners and amateur actors. The only slightly famous names were Hélène Chanel and Lucio Flauto, who were celebrities in the Milan area, but almost unknown in the rest of the country. But I'm pretty happy with the film and it got me some really positive reviews. The newspaper *La Notte* called it "a near masterpiece".

Did you work with Aristide Massaccesi again?

From time to time I wrote something for him (or to be more precise for his producers), like *Emanuelle and the Last Cannibals (Emanuelle e gli ultimi cannibali, 1977)* for example, but we were not as close as we used to be. Years before, we were like brothers, but we took different paths. I became Mariano Laurenti's official assistant director, while he kept on directing films, becoming a household name for the X-rated market. Aristide was a truly wonderful person; he was generous and funny as hell, but he was also an extremely talented director. I've never met a handheld camera operator as skilled as he was. And he did amazing things without using dollies. He was a true master.



ABOUT THE TRANSFER

Death Smiles on a Murderer is presented in its original aspect ratio of 1.85:1 with Italian and English mono audio. The original 35mm camera negative was scanned in 2K resolution at EuroLab.

The film was graded on Digital Vision's Nucoda Film Master and restored at R3Store Studios. Thousands of instances of dirt, debris, scratches, picture instability and other instances of film wear were repaired or removed through a combination of digital restoration tools and techniques.

The mono Italian and English language tracks were remastered from the optical sound negatives at Deluxe Media, Los Angeles. The audio synch will appear slightly loose against the picture, due to the fact that the soundtracks were recorded entirely in post-production.

Restoration supervised by James White, Arrow Films

R3Store Studios Gerry Gedge, Jo Griffin, Andrew O'Hagan, Rich Watson

Deluxe Media Jordan Perry

Variety Elisabetta Volpe

EuroLab Laura Indiveri

PRODUCTION CREDITS

Disc and Booklet Produced by James Blackford

Executive Producers Kevin Lambert, Francesco Simeoni

Technical Producer James White

Production Co-ordinator Liane Cunje

QC Manager Nora Mehenni

Blu-ray Mastering The Engine House

Artist Gilles Vranckx

Design Obviously Creative

SPECIAL THANKS

Alex Agran, Ewa Aulin, Federico Caddeo, Roberto Curti, Kat Ellinger, Manlio Gomasasca, Tim Lucas, Marc Morris, Anthony Nield, Stephen Thrower, Simona Tito



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