

By Gary Dretzka

Slaughter Tales

The Day: Blu-ray

The Apparition: Blu-ray

6 Degrees of Hell

Considering that “Slaughter Tales” is the creation of a 14-year-old first-time filmmaker, I wavered between reviewing it and sending him a report card. If I were the faculty adviser of his middle school’s A-V club, I would be inclined to give Johnnie Dickie an “A,” both for execution and chutzpah. How many teenagers, after all, would have the brass even to attempt a feature-length horror anthology as their debut production? Moreover, how many of his peers could pull it off on a budget of something north of \$65? The only other person in the same category that I’m aware of is Austin native Emily Hagins, who, at 12, made the horror movie “Pathogen” and, seven years later, sent out the funny horror/comedy “My Sucky Teen Romance.” I’m sure that Hagins had a healthier budget than Dickie with which to play. As a critic, however, all I’m willing to say about “Slaughter Tales” is that I’ve seen a lot worse horror flicks from far more accomplished directors. Visually, it’s possible to see every penny of that \$65 on the screen, which admittedly is something of a left-handed compliment. Even so, I think teenage viewers would get a bigger kick out of the movie than adults, many of whom would be distracted by the off-color language and over-the-top violence. Anyone wondering if Johnnie’s parents knew what was going on in their kitchen when they were away and he was supposed to be doing homework might be interested to know that his mom makes a cameo, in which she’s killed.

As the story goes, a teenager shoplifts a cheesy VHS cassette and, even before he can insert it into his machine, is cautioned about its contents by a ghostly apparition. Needless to say, the kid can’t resist the movie’s magnetic pull and potential for evil kicks. It inspires him to go on a killing spree, from which the five short films in this anthology derive. The tales, which reflect a geeky affection for 1980s-vintage horror and slasher pictures, benefit from Dickie’s complete disregard for mainstream taste and decorum. The props consisted of items found lying around the house, dollar stores or at garage sales, while lights seem to have been limited to flashlights. The special makeup effects were created from things found in a pantry. For a 14-year-old, Johnnie also seems to have assimilated 40 years’ worth of camera, lighting and acting techniques unique to the genre. For all I know, kids around the world are creating similar movie to “Slaughter Tales” using little more than a cellphone and Halloween makeup kits. If not, though, Dickie and Hagins have a big leg up on everyone else to come. (There’s a parody of “Slaughter Tales” called “Pizza Tales” already on YouTube.) And, yes, I’m pretty sure Steven Spielberg started exactly this way. It comes with behind-the-scenes featurettes and commentary.