

Indie Horror Films

All genres of suspense, terror, and horror will be reviewed by Richard Gary. His address to send preview copies supplied upon request to rbf55@msn.com.

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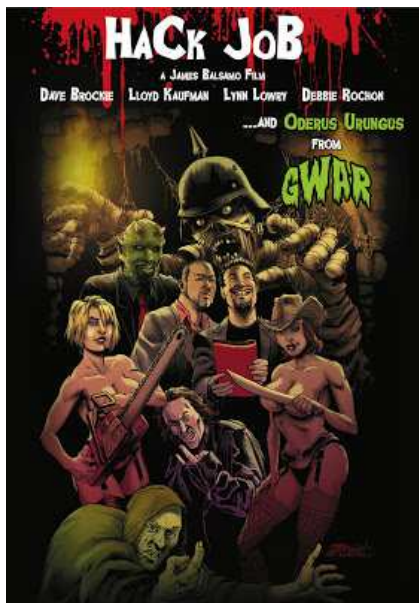
DVD Reviews: Three by James Balsamo: Hack Job; I Spill Your Guts; Cool as Hell

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Images from the Internet

Trailers for the films are at the end of all the reviews

That *bon mot* is true, y'know: *location, location, location*. That's the only way anyone can really explain the cameos that appear in Balsamo's films. I mean, Lloyd Kaufman (king of Troma), Debbie Rochon (a queen of scream queens), Lyn Lowery (early indie horror goddess), Tim Ritter (fellow low-budget director of some classics like *Creep*), Andrew W.K. (overrated rock singer), Dave Brockie (GWAR's Oderus Urungus), Joe Flieshaker (the rotund Mayor of Tromaville) and even Tom Savini (the Chuck Berry of modern gore SFX) If these films had been shot anywhere else than around New York City, the odds of this caliber of presence would probably never happen. My guess is that he met many of them at horror-cons, most likely the NJ Horror-Thon (I still remember going when it was called the Chiller Theatre Con). And by the way, Acid Bath Productions has a great animated logo. I'm just sayin'.



Hack Job

Produced, written and directed by James Balsamo

Acid Bath Productions

Wild Eye Releasing

90 minutes, 2011

www.WildEyeReleasing.com

www.MVDvisual.com

Within the first five minutes, you know you are going to see a brain-dead film that will be fun from beginning to end. The devil (and his minions), who claims to have brought on the Holocaust, 9/11 and *The View*, sends a film script to two "idiots" who decide to take the three stories and make an independent movie. These two *maroons* are the director, James Balsamo, and his frequent partner in crime, Michael ("Mike") Shershenovich, the director of the film *Bloody Christmas* [reviewed [HERE](#)]; they also share many of the same cast. The song in the opening credits informs you of what the tales will contain (just follow the bouncing skull). Obviously the filmmakers are taking this project as an act of joy, so fuck it, why not do the same.

As a sidenote, after the first couple of episodes of *Gilligan's Island* started, the producers also gave it a "fuck it,| and made the decision not to focus on the reality of where all the clothes and props came from, or anything else, deciding to make it story-based episode by episode; a similar philosophy is apparently present here, for the better.

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The first story, "Tomb of the SS," starts with some present day Nazis (one has a thick New York accent, who is watching two topless women dance like the models in the Robert Palmer "Addicted to Love" video, except in SS hats). The New York Nazis take over an archeological dig in Afghanistan (looks like some beach out on Long Island), where they force the hero (director Balsamo) to read some hieroglyphics that raise an army of Egyptian (in Afghanistan?!) mummies that attack the group, even though he never does get around to any translating! Somehow a Russian air force pilot (Shershenovich) gets involved. It's all done with great bravado and in heroic tones, with Balsamo talking in that cinematic condescending tone to humorous effect. Hell, while there is no surprise and the blood and gore couldn't look more fake (as is true with the rest of the film), the story is a hoot. I could see it in another dimension being a solid *Amazing Stories* episode with different writers, actors and director, of course).

The second story is called "Earth is on the Menu," not to be confused with the classic *Twilight Zone*, "To Serve Man." In this, a meteorite a la *The Blob*, takes over some people via pink vines up their noses, and winds up at a local Battle of the Bands (held at **Lulu's Village Pub**, Port Jefferson, NY), where it's a greaser group vs., well, Balsamo on a stand-up bass. Obviously none of them play an instrument and barely try. The creature finally pops out of someone and is essentially a bend cardboard sheet with what looks like either silly string or really thick, colorful paint on it. Oh, and did I mention the very visible strings moving the tentacles (see the trailer)?

Of course, a defender from another planet aka Dave Brockie as Oderus Urungus, appears (he also has an extremely funny take as a bartender sans mask). Nothing like having a being from another planet scream out, "He's got me! Jesus Fucking Christ!" It comes to a battle of the bassist and the beast. Nah, I'm not gonna tell ya the result.

The last story, "The Mark," is the most convoluted and ridiculous of the three, or to put it this way, the most fun of all the pieces... and the others had me laughing, too. There is a lot of religious imagery in this one, from both the Christian and Jewish perspectives. The central character is a man (Balsamo, again) who is into astral projection, or as his ex-girlfriend calls it, "asshole projection". He's worried about what he's doing while he sleeps (apparently killing evil people by pulling their spine out of their eyesocket), so he seeks out his rabbi, Lloyd Kaufman (!), who has the payot (hair curls) attached via a band on his head, like earmuffs. He offers Balsamo a plate of bacon and mentions a woman coming to teach a topless Torah lesson. Oy!

This segment, which was originally supposed to be a kung fu flick as shown in one of the extra deleted scenes, ends up being a hot mess, with ridiculous and dubbed over dialog, absolutely no sense of sequence (it's not for nuthin' that a common theme of the film is a distaste for narrative filmmaking), utterly no continuity, and possibly a hint of racism. How nuts, you may ask? Well, the title refers to a mark on the main character's back that is mentioned a number of times, but is never shown. In other words, ten pounds of crap in a five pound bag that – if you're like me when it comes to indie horror films – you will be happy to be immersed.

Between the stories are fake commercials, trailers, and other bits, including an extended promotion for Troma Studios with Kaufman, as well as the masked later versions (as opposed to make-up) of Toxie and Sgt. Kabukiman. The Kaufman bits are funny if hammed up (pun intended), though the *Tromaville P.D.* etc., bit is kinda whatever.

I found it interesting that this movie was obviously filmed over an extended time, probably as shorts put together with a thread. The quality of the actual images changes pretty often. For example, in one of the between bits, with Lyn Lowery (over)playing a script agent, suddenly the visual is of much lesser quality, sort of like it was film on VHS and transferred.

Extras include the trailer, a blooper reel of the first "Tomb of the SS" bit, and the aforementioned unused kung fu clips of "The Mark."

This film is, undoubtedly a waste of time, but what a great way to squander an hour and a half. Think I may watch this again, now... I've got time to kill.



I Spill Your Guts

Produced, written and directed by James Balsamo

Acid Bath Productions

Wild Eye Releasing

90 minutes, 2012

www.ispillyourguts.com

www.WildEyeReleasing.com

www.MVDvisual.com

In the middle of a gun battle in (Afghanistan?) (Iraq?), two besties get caught in an ambush, resulting in an act of cowardice that causes the other to get shot in the throat. Informed that his injured friend will probably die while in a German hospital, the unharmed Joe Bava (Billy Walsh) smugly tells his pal, Dennis Berkowitz (director Balsamo) that he is taking the credit for saving the supposedly cowardly Dennis, which includes a medal and honorable discharge. This makes Dennis angry enough to live and seek revenge on anyone associated with Joe.

Berkowitz (really? A multiple killer named Berkowitz? Hasn't that been done enough in real life?) busts out of the hospital leaving a trail of bodies of the doctors who saved him (?), where he really could have just walked out. Hmmm.

We come back to New York (referred often in title cards as "New York, NY" rather than just "New York City"), where Joe is a drunken, braggart ass, and Dennis kills just about anyone who runs across his path in various and semi-imaginative ways (e.g., a sandwich shoved down a throat and a pair of hedge clippers). Meanwhile, there are numerous scenes seemingly thrown in as filler, such as someone giving a wrestling lesson, or the bizarrely tattooed in real life barbell boy Tim Dax. Oh, did I mention that there is another serial killer thrown in for one scene for whatever reason? Hey, this all leads to a decent body count.

The cast in this film is huge, with nearly 50 roles listed in the IMDB, most of which have speaking roles, many of which seem to be ad libbed. While this never seems to be confusing, as the revenge story line is paper thin and the rest is just short pieces (pun intended) of the disposal of people. To tell the truth, I'm totally okay with that. Why invest in a fodder character when their screen time is so limited. Besides, it's the killings that we want to see anyway, right?

As par the course, the writing is okay, though there are some genuinely intentionally funny moments (and quite a few of the other kind). The acting is kind of, well, there, kinda-sorta, with some genuinely decent readings (Rochon, for example, clearly and literally phones in her role, but she comes across quite natural in the moment).

One of the major characters of the film is also the largest filler: multiple shots on the streets of New York. Mostly it's just a few seconds of buildings or crowds, and it's fun to pick out where is what (there is one shot that I am totally baffled by, perhaps in a borough). Yes, this does make the film longer, but that's exactly what *Easy Rider* (1969) did, though in that case, there was more music over scenery than actual story. At least it certainly felt that way. But I digress... Like most of the film, these shots are single-camera and handheld. I would recommend that if the budget does not permit a tripod, then with all the filmmakers involved as cast, surely someone must have a spare to be borrowed, please. Then again, I'm grateful this is not a "found footage" level of shaky.

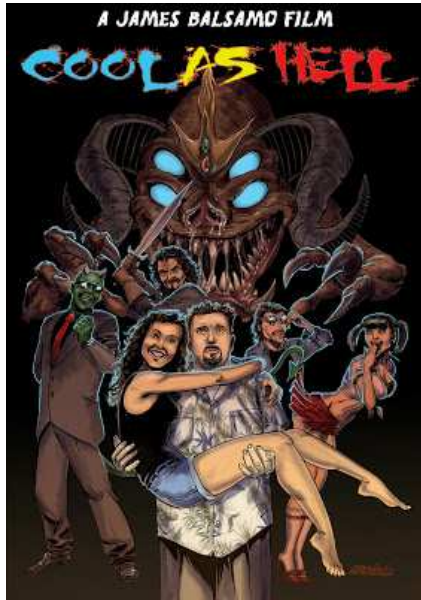
As for the music, there's a lot listed, including by the Meatmen and other screamo / death metal bands of whom I am honestly not familiar (possibly where the budget went?). They should have used Chesty Malone and the Slice-Em-Ups, in my opinion. Check them out, James.

While the acting is questionable and the writing passable, the effects do range from laughable to quite

decent. There's quite a bit of spatter, though the actual event is not shown in very much detail. For example, in the opening scene, there is a totally naked male body, sans head (upper; lower is intact). Or you'll see a sharp object get raised, a quick close-up of something, and then the person dead in whatever bloody shape. Of course, there's lots of nudity, piercings and tattoos.

There are a number of extras, such as the trailer, deleted scenes (meh), a gag reel (pretty funny), a music video of "Destructor" by Ghoul (who appear in a full-song, sync'd, extended stage performance in the film), and an interview with the artist who drew the DVD covers, Brooklyn-based Jeff Zarnow.

All in all, if you're into the whole Troma zeitgeist, this will fit in pretty way to that canon.



Cool as Hell

Produced, written and directed by James Balsamo

Acid Bath Productions

Wild Eye Releasing

90 minutes, 2012 / 2013

www.WildEyeReleasing.com

www.MVDvisual.com

The third opus here is just one of five flicks Balsamo has filmed or has in production for 2013. As par, this one is also sex and drug and rock'n'roll...well, death metal, anyway. As with most, it is a horror comedy.

Don't get me wrong, I believe that Balsamo fares much better with comedy horror like *Hack Job* than with a more serious slant, as with the more straightforward *I Spill Your Guts*. The former is a lot more, well, *forgiving* than the latter.

Here, we meet the main protagonist, comic book store manager Rick (Balsamo, of course), and his roommate and best friend Benny (stalwart Dan E. Danger). Both of them combined seem to have a double digit IQ. Rich wears only Hawaiian-style shirts and has two-tone hair which is often referred to in the story as a "cheetah" (though it's just yellow on top, dark on the bottom, rather than patterned). He talks rather like an AM disc jockey, but at a junior high school level. A loveable schlub? Yeah, I guess. But a monolog he has about a superhero comics shows why he strikes out so often.

In fact, the tone of the film and these two characters just smack of early Kevin Smith, with Balsamo being the (un-)Silent Bob and Danger the quirky, off-center Jay. Even in the early days of *Clerks* (1994), Smith showed more filmmaking competency than Balsamo, but you know what, where I found Smith to be clever but dull, I enjoy most of Balsamo's output more (with the exception of *Dogma* [1999], but I digress...). There is more of a level of *whatever* in Balsamo's work, possibly due to having so many films in such a short amount of time to really concentrate on proficiency, but it's just so stupid and inane, that it gives genuine laughs.

The plot (no need to use the work "thickens" here) is as sort of as follows (most of this is on the DVD cover or coming attractions below, so I'm not giving much away): a green demon named Az (Billy Walsh; great make-up) – short for Azmodius? – is somehow enthralled to Rick, so of course Rick wants to use him to get laid. Did I mention there is a LOT of female nudity (and even some softcore shots), as usual?

Rick meets the possible girl of his dreams, Ashley (the cute and toothsome Lauren Adamkiewicz; I hope Balsamo uses her again, as this is among her only credits). Her boyfriend is a macho loanshark bully / dick who abuses her (Balsamo regular Frank Mullen, who is also the vocalist of the Long Island-based death metal band, Suffocation) and is constantly threatening Rick. He swings the “fuck” word as much as most people use “the.” Along the way, a portal to hell opens which releases a bunch of zombies (again, great make-up on the few we see) onto the streets of New York – including Patchogue, NY, where much of this was shot. Will our loser hero rise to the occasion, even after being given a bong that never runs out of weed by a blue and yellow booger named, well, Booghar?

A theme that runs throughout the film, to an amusing albeit overdone motif, is Rick accidentally bonking into people who curse him out, including members of numerous death metal bands that appear on the soundtrack, or actors he managed to shoot for very brief cameos, such as David Naughton (the lead in *An American Werewolf in London* in 1981). Many of the stars that appear on this film, such as Laurence R. Harvey (of 2011’s *The Human Centipede II: The Final Sequence*) and Tom Savini are there less than 15 seconds, so don’t blink.

For me, the one major flaw in the film, other than the sheer stupidity of the whole thing (for which I am grateful), is an extended scene with Ray trying to get money from his brother-in-law. It has an ad-libbed feel that just does not work for that long of an extended scene that doesn’t move the story along. It should have been sliced up to a much smaller time, and perhaps added to a deleted scenes extra.

Speaking of extras, this one is kinda skimpy at three trailers, but that’s okay. Who has time for extras when writing and directing five films in one year, right? There is part of me that truly wishes Balsamo would slow the fuck down and do perhaps two a year, and really work on them, rather than just put down anything that goes through his mind at the moment. That’s why something like *Clerks* became a hit. Here, there is too much inconsistency, no overdubs to drown out the traffic noise, and more holes in the story than (put your analogy here). But on the other hand, this is such a high level of guerilla filmmaking that you can’t help but marvel at some of the stuff they pull off, such as a scene outside a church where they never actually enter the church, which had me in stitches.

It is interesting to see these three films over a short amount of time. There is definite growth going on in skill (and especially non-digital effects), so I am hoping this will only increase in time. And, for some reason, I look forward to more of James Balsamo’s perhaps increasing competency, if not lunacy.