



THE GORE MET

MENU: TENDERIZE AND SKIN BEFORE SERVING

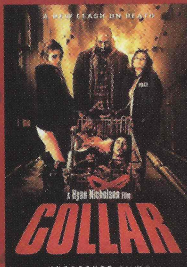


Last year was a banner one for independent and underground film, attributable to an explosion of fan culture on social media, particularly Facebook. Currently, there are myriad public and private groups devoted to underground films and the filmmakers are part of them, marketing directly to their fans. The smart ones make fans part of their productions through crowdfunding, pre-selling signed DVDs and screen credits for \$10-\$15 a pop — manna to those who feel part of a “scene.” My columns last year were littered with examples of this new way of doing business, and I’ll start this year by spotlighting a couple of worthy films released too late for our December issue.

Ryan Nicholson is Canada’s king of underground filmmaking. Outside of a career in special effects for mainstream film and television productions, he makes his own gore-centric movies (including *Live Feed*, *Gutterballs* and *Hanger*) through Plotdigger Films. Look him up — he’s a quintessential example of a filmmaker who has harnessed social media to connect with his fans.

While I wrote about Nicholson’s latest film, *Collar* (2014) for the indie film feature in *RM#145*, now that it’s out on DVD from Unerthed Films (currently distributing their releases through MVD Visual), it’s high time to give it another push. *Collar* is an evolutionary step in Nicholson’s development as a storyteller. This one comes from his heart — a plea for humanity dressed in exploitation trappings and inspired by the homeless in Vancouver’s Downtown East Side.

The plot is based on *Bum Fights*, a reprehensible series of videos made in the 2000s. Here, a duo hawks cell phone videos of vagrants they incite into fighting each other. They inadvertently come across a mute homeless man nicknamed “Massive” (Nick Principe), who beats other vagrants and rapes prostitutes, occasionally ripping their hearts out and eating them! Authorities — official and not — become involved when Massive kidnaps female detective Dana (Aidan Dee).



Collar

Nicholson makes progressive choices in his characterizations; his main female lead, Dana, is gay, but her sexuality is a facet of her character, not a component of the plot. Massive is not a monster, rather a tortured soul with a boyhood history of sexual abuse and mental illness. Heady material for a crass gore film! It’s too bad the DVD doesn’t include any supplementary material other than trailers for other Unerthed Films, as it’s a missed opportunity for Nicholson to explain some of his motivations for making his movie.

Dustin Wayne Mills is another underground filmmaker who built a fan base through tits, gore, self-distribution and social media. He writes, directs, edits, scores and handles effects for all his films. His latest, *Skinless* (2014), got distribution from Whacked Films, which also puts out its acquisitions through MVD Visual.

Skinless is a bargain basement take (literally!) on David Cronenberg’s remake of *The Fly* (1986). An eccentric young doctor, Peter Peele (Brandon Salkil) discovers a potential cure for cancer in the form of a corrosive enzyme produced by a parasitic worm found in the rivers of South America. His big pharma financial backer (Dave Parker) is reluctant to fund the research and trials necessary to get the serum to market, so Peele surreptitiously develops the serum with the aid of his

partner (and unrequited love), Alice (Erin R. Ryan). To her consternation, Peter decides to forgo animal testing for a human trial... himself, as he’s dying of skin cancer.

The serum works initially, until Peter’s skin dissolves. The other major side effect: Peter must nourish himself with liquefied human flesh, which he gets by spewing acid on his victims. Driven insane by the changes in his physiology, he keeps Alice prisoner in the attic of their suburban laboratory to help him get his skin back.

As writer/director, Mills conveys a firm grasp on scale. There are only four actors in this film; aside from the aforementioned, there’s Olivia Egan who appears as Peter’s “friend with benefits.” Also, the entire movie takes place in a single location. Mills fleshes out the paucity of the production and makes it all gel with quirky camera work, copious gore effects and a genuinely creepy score.

The extras on the disc match the film’s budget but they are all interesting. Mills included a selection of production diaries, originally posted to YouTube, and a solo, feature-length commentary, which amounts to a master class in no-budget filmmaking. In the end, Mills makes his creative process as accessible as he makes himself.

It’s great to start off 2015 with two solid examples that prove indie gore is alive and kicking it nasty.

