

**HOMEGROWN
HORROR**



MODEL HUNGER

**Debbie Rochon Talks
Revenge Horror!**

Getting a film – any film – made presents one hell of an undertaking, particularly when working outside of a studio system that ensures those involved get paid. Making an independent film on a low budget requires grit, determination and resourcefulness, with no guarantee of any financial return. It is in such filmmaking where true creativity and passion is to be found; a love and celebration of film, unpolluted by astronomical monetary figures, studio politics and egos. A champion of truly independent cinema and something of a beloved figure within the industry, actress, producer, writer and now director Debbie Rochon embodies this spirit. Probably best known for her years working with those legendary outlaws of indie cinema, Troma Studios, Debbie has forged a career from acting in mostly low-to-no budget genre films.

When discussing Debbie's films, it's tough to know where to start; with nearly 250 acting credits to her name, her CV is like a psychotronic tour through the last 35 years of underground and straight-to-video horror. Thankfully, Debbie is on hand to point us to a few career highlights, and titles she feels deserve a little more recognition, although the list includes "so many [films] for so many reasons. I think movies like the noir influenced film *Nowhere Man*, the black and white 1940s style film *Exhumed* and the H.P. Lovecraft themed movie *Colour From the Dark* all deserve a look. Not every movie hits its mark perfectly," she happily admits, "but all were done with such sincerity while we made them I will never forget the experience. Sometimes the best experience making a movie will not always be the ones that are either received the best or seen enough. I have always said as an actor my favourite films I have made are *American Nightmare*, *Theatre Bizarre*, *Slime City Massacre* and even the very campy *Abducted II: The Reunion*." Ah, *Slime City Massacre*; Greg Lamberson's allegorical, gloriously colourful belated sequel to his ultra-low budget 1988 'melt movie' gem *Slime City*. The cult director's latest, *Killer Rack* (and yes, it is that type of rack) also stars Ms. Rochon, who brought Lamberson onboard as line producer and first assistant director for *Model Hunger*, her first foray into directing.

Set for a US release later this year, *Model Hunger* opens with image-obsessed cheerleaders Katie and Missy, going door-to-door to raise funds for their squad. "Just one more house" turns out to be the last house they will ever visit, when they knock on the door of Ginny, a onetime fashion model who was cast from the exploitative

industry for having the "wrong body type". As the years passed, Ginny became ever more reclusive, but still holds one hell of a grudge. New neighbours Debbie and Sal move in next door, and Debbie soon starts to suspect that something odd is happening over at Ginny's, becoming increasingly obsessed with the goings on there. The unhinged and psychotic Ginny takes an interest right back, and as the bodies stack up, she decides to put an end to Debbie's snooping. All the while, trashy anti-fashion TV show *Suzi's Secret* plays constantly in the houses of the two women, seeming to hold them (and a number of other locals) under its mysterious spell.

"James Morgart sent me the script which was based on his short story called *Ginny*,"

Debbie explains of her film's beginnings. "After I read it I was so excited to tell him how much I loved it and even then my mind was spinning overtime adding details and seeing the movie as much as a vision than as a script. So when I spoke to him afterwards and he asked if I wanted to direct it I was jumping out of my skin to do it. It was not a difficult answer."

Model Hunger has a distinctly retro (and at times undeniably Tromaesque) feel but tonally, it really has its own thing going on. It's raw and old-school, but a million miles from the grindhouse throwbacks that have become so fashionable in recent years. The film actually treads carefully so as to avoid clichés and mere imitation at every turn, giving it a sense of conviction and honesty;





Debbie describes Morgart's script as "very original, not cookie cutter in any way." While it does not shy away from revealing certain influences, it brings them together to create a feel all its own. Handheld camerawork and some over-the-top performances certainly have a whiff of Troma about them, as do cheerleaders Katie and Missy, whose opening of the story could fool Troma fans into thinking they're in for something wholly familiar. Elements of grimy exploitation come and go, betraying influences but not dominating the film's overall aesthetic. There are also moments of proper bizarre trash cinema, at times even evoking the work of 'Pope of Trash' John Waters. The inexplicable fascination various characters develop with garish TV show *Suzi's Secret* matches the absurdities of *Female Trouble* or *Polyester*; indeed, the role of presenter Suzi feels like one that could have ideally suited the late Divine. "The *Suzi's Secret* show is on everyone's TV all the time, affecting everyone in a different way. I love how the show feeds into the motivation of Ginny, affects the sex life of a number of the town characters and drives the plot in its own twisted way, while the characters who don't see the show are apparently more 'normal' and unaffected," Debbie points out. Balancing the grit and grime though, is a wonderful score by Friday the 13th composer Harry Manfredini, which came about by circumstance. "I ran into Harry at a horror convention. He had heard about the movie and told me he needed to do the score for it. I laughed just thinking he was being sweet but he did the entire soundtrack and brought the movie to a whole new level. He got it. Harry was perfect," she says.

"I wanted it to have a raw feel, the type of feel I really dug in movies like the original

Maniac, but by no means did I want to fall into a silly glib body image film that featured far too glamorous actors and thus not really embracing the true point of the movie," Debbie tells me, and *Model Hunger's* "true point" is expressed at every turn, in a number of different ways and from different angles. Katie and Missy struggle to see past their own shallow self-involvements, and it is presumably no accident that Samantha Hoy and Lisa Dee's respective performances convey a distinct lack of depth, which adds to the trick that we're in for something a little less sincere than *Model Hunger* proves to be. Ginny's personal affront to the two is understandable and despite the fact that she is batshit crazy, she represents an unavoidable truth about an industry that chews up and spits out young women according to shifting trends.

Lurching between old-fashioned Americana sweetness and white-hot ferocity, Ginny is a complex character, made all the more so by cult icon Lynn Lowry's intense portrayal. Known primarily for a string of '70s/'80s horror roles including George Romero's *The Crazies* and David Cronenberg's *Shivers*, Lowry made something of a trademark of her quiet, spaced-out, hippie demeanour, most evident perhaps in *The Crazies* and her feature debut, exploitation gem *I Drink Your Blood* (if you've not seen it, do so. At once). "[Lynn] is stellar in the role," Debbie asserts, and she's not wrong; Ginny initially appears sugary sweet, but it is when the gleefully saccharine facade is allowed to slip that Lynn is fully let off the leash. Screaming and howling burning vitriol at her character's victims, Lynn's performance is miles from the soft timidity of her early film roles, and

gives the film a sense of violence far beyond the bloodshed it actually shows which, for the most part is not particularly graphic (that is, until the climactic moments, which play host to some truly shocking scenes). A tragic victim of the fashion industry's cold-blooded production-line mentality, Ginny is irreparably and heartbreakingly ruined by her modelling experiences. At her most enraged, what breaks through her boggle-eyed brutality is a sense of regret; of a life wasted on grudges and hatred. "In my opinion she was born to play this role," Debbie says of Lowry. "While she wasn't the first I approached, as fate would have it she ended up being the one to do it and the movie couldn't have been more fortunate to have her. Sometimes you have to trust why things happen the way they do and smile, because in fact everything turned out exactly the way it needed to for the film."

Model Hunger's other powerhouse performance comes from Tiffany Shepis, who plays Ginny's new neighbour Debbie. Imprisoned in her house as much as her loveless marriage, Debbie divides her time between peering through the curtains at Ginny and watching *Suzi's Secret* on TV. "She is so solid in this film, I love her performance. It's the perfect counter to crazy Ginny," says Rochon. "I have known Tiffany for many years. I had just made *Wrath of the Crows* with her and immediately thought she would kill the role and she did." A fellow Troma alumnus, Tiffany Shepis was a presenter on Channel 4's Troma's *Edge TV* (as Super Tromette Bulimia), and also starred alongside Debbie in Troma flicks *Terror Firmer*, *Citizen Toxie: The Toxic Avenger IV* and one of the studio's very best, 1996's *Tromeo and Juliet*, which Debbie remembers fondly. "It was so cool," Debbie



says of the twisted take on Shakespeare's classic tragedy. "This was a first for Troma in my opinion. Yeah it was crazy and over the top but it was really the first Troma film in a long time that hired some kick ass actors." The onscreen talent was matched behind the camera, with scripter James Gunn going on to direct *Slither* and later, Marvel's *Guardians of the Galaxy* (in which he found a brief cameo for Troma president Lloyd Kaufman). "James Gunn worked so hard on the film and his unedited ideas and twisted mind were definitely apparent. There's no way to tell where anyone will end up in the future but I do remember he was intensely dedicated and endlessly inspired by making the movie."

While on the subject of Troma, it would be foolhardy not to ask Debbie what life is like behind the hallowed doors of Tromaville. "Life in Tromaville is great and insane," she enthuses. "There are some of the best people who are lifelong friends that I made out of the experience and some bizarre crazy times. I remember when Lemmy was brought on to do a part in *Terror Firmer*, he had already been in *Tromeo and Juliet*, he required a limo, coke and some babes to drive him from the airport to Brooklyn where we were shooting. The crew on the set asked me to be one of the limo girls but I declined. Lots of crazy funny stories like that. Wouldn't trade it for the world."

While Debbie took a number of non-Troma roles during her years with the studio, 2002's *American Nightmare* seems to mark a point when the actress started really doing her own thing, finding recognition outside of her work with Lloyd Kaufman's crazy factory. Debbie leads the film as serial killer Jane Toppan, who listens in to a radio show that invites its young listeners to confess their biggest fears. She then sets about stalking a group

of callers, intent on bringing their fears to life. "Director Jon Keeyes had seen the movie I shot in South Carolina with Gunnar Hansen called *Hellblock 13* and thought I would do his script justice," she says of her casting. "I delved so deep and committed so much to that role I remember making it like it was yesterday. It takes a really special script to have a female character that is multi-levelled, not a silly stereotype and I was afforded so much improv. Loved it."

Debbie made her acting debut in punk comedy *Ladies and Gentlemen: The Fabulous Stains!* at age 14; "I spent 3 months as a featured extra on the film and was one if not the only teen who took it deadly seriously," she recalls; "I realised I wanted to dedicate my life to film." Since then, she has done just that. With so much experience of the industry, as well as a handful of producing credits, it may come as a surprise to some that it has taken until now, and *Model Hunger* for her to turn her hand to directing. She explains: "I had been asked to direct before but knowing you live with a movie as a director for many years it had to be something I felt deeply about, and this was the script that made me feel that that would be easy to do. I will most definitely direct again," she asserts, adding "that time will present itself when it's right." Don't expect Debbie to entirely relocate behind the camera anytime soon however; with acting roles in no less than 18 films currently in various stages of production, she clearly has no plans to leave acting behind. "A movie I made in the UK called *Serial Kaller* came out recently. *Solid State*, a movie I made in Italy, which is a really fun Sci-Fi flick, will be coming out on Blu-Ray this year. There are a few more releases but you'll have to keep an

eye out for the release news which I will be thrilled to share as the info comes in," she tells me, excitedly. Other recent films of Debbie's include horror comedy *Clinger*, in which she appears alongside *Elm Street* survivor Lisa Wilcox, and the second part of Lloyd Kaufman's Troma revival, *Return to Nuke 'Em High Volume 2*. Debbie also appears among innumerable horror icons in the upcoming, much-talked-about 'Expendables of horror' *Death House*.

Of her years spent working in an ever-changing industry, Debbie believes that "besides more films being made the biggest change is the way viewers are seeing the movies. Now with all the gadgets you can watch *Model Hunger* on your phone by the end of the year! I would rather people watch it on a big LCD screen but as long as they are watching it that is the bottom line." Personifying the determination and love of film that defines independent and underground cinema, Debbie Rochon is a big believer in the power of film to effect change. Looking back on a tough upbringing that saw her living on the streets of New York as a young teenager, she says of that first role in *Ladies and Gentlemen: The Fabulous Stains!* that set out a new path for her, that "the last thing on my mind was becoming a posturing 'star'. That was never my dream. I moved to NYC to study acting because as long as it may take, I wanted nothing more than to be a great actor. The experience gave me something to live for and strive for and if that isn't as powerful as it gets I don't know what is." Wise words indeed...

Model Hunger is released on DVD in the US on July 12th courtesy of Wild Eye Releasing. 🍷