

starts having visions of a malevolent woman (*Starry Eyes'* Maria Olsen) who seems determined to take over her life. Could it be her long-lost mother, even though her Aunt Ruth (Nancy Wolfe) told her that she died years earlier?

Soon Jordyn starts losing time and ending up in strange places with no memory of how she got there. As her grip on reality slips away, she makes a last-ditch effort (with Ruth's help) to hold onto herself before she's overtaken by what seems to be the workings of an actual witch.

Or something.

Mark of the Witch is, to be generous, loosely plotted. Bognacki focuses on creating a mood of dread thanks to ominous music, sound design and the aforementioned strange imagery. Too bad he's let down by the wooden performance of his lead. Ro-



jas is beautiful but does not convincingly portray the terror Jordyn must be enduring. By contrast, Maria Olsen makes for a terrifying witch, one you believe would gladly sacrifice newborn babies in pursuit of eternal youth.

Mark of the Witch's genesis as a short film is evident in its scant 79-minute running time, an astonishing ten minutes of which are taken up by the end credits. The film's visual inventiveness, especially given its obvious shoestring budget, is both unexpected and commendable, but portentous dialogue and weak storytelling make *Mark of the Witch* a mixed (hex) bag.

SEAN PLUMMER

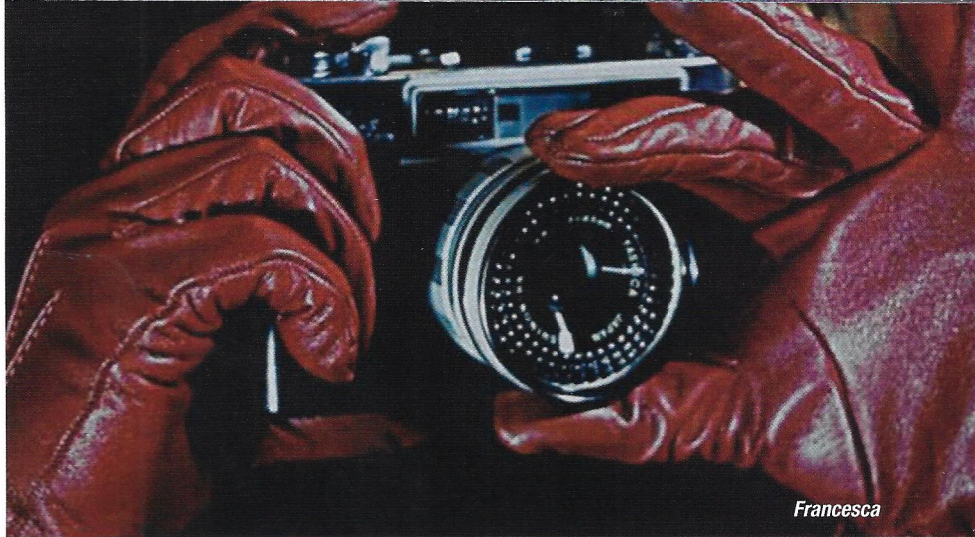
TRoubled Waters

THE GREASY STRANGLER

Starring Michael St. Michaels, Sky Elobar and Elizabeth De Razzo
Directed by Jim Hosking
Written by Jim Hosking and Toby Harvard
FilmRise

With his ghastly/entertaining "G is for Grandad" segment of *ABCs of Death 2*, Jim Hosking announced himself as a purveyor of a particular brand of perverse picture-making, rooted in uneasy family relations. It finds fuller flower in *The Greasy Strangler*, which demonstrates Hosking's complete commitment to his weird worldview. Its lead characters, Big Ronnie (Michael St. Michaels) and his grown son Brayden (Sky Elobar), are in the habit of calling each other "bullshit artists," but Hosking, who scripted the feature with Toby Harvard, clearly is not one – he believes in this warped material. Unfortunately, the movie also makes evident that it works better in the short form.

The Greasy Strangler is unapologetically gross and, yes, greasy. Big Ronnie and Brayden live in a filthy home, eat yucky food and are partial to wearing women's clothing, when not exposing themselves, which in Big Ronnie's case means



Francesca

revealing an oversized prosthetic schlong. Sex, in fact, is a motivating factor in the movie's storyline – such as it is – in which uber dorky Brayden somehow lands a girlfriend. Janet (Elizabeth De Razzo) is a clearly adventurous young woman who meets the father and son when she goes on one of their cheesy "Disco Tours." Unfortunately for Brayden's happiness, Big Ronnie quickly begins devoting himself to stealing Janet away from him. Oh yes, and as he admits to Brayden early on, Big Ronnie is also the title murderer, who coats himself in grease before dispatching unfortunate victims, with methods not limited to strangling.

Despite the mayhem, *The Greasy Strangler* is less a horror film than a successor to the early comedies of John Waters, which paired dysfunctional family relations with extreme gross-outs. The crucial difference is that where there was some sense of understanding and empathy with the misfits in the likes of *Pink Flamingos*, where in the characters and their grotesque behavior are simply on display, with no real rooting interest. As a result, a little of the movie's appalling attitude goes a long way, and a sense of repetition sets in after the first fifteen minutes or so. Hosking's dedication to his depraved, puerile people is admirable, but he wants us to wallow in the muck without giving us a reason to care. And I call bullshit on that.

MICHAEL GINGOLD

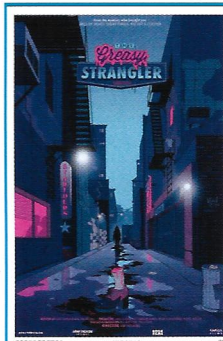
A MOVIE IN A GIALLO'S SKIN

FRANCESCA

Starring Raul Gederlini, Silvina Grippaldi and Luis Emilio Rodriguez
Directed by Luciano Onetti
Written by Luciano and Nicolás Onetti
MVD Films

You have to admire *Francesca*, but you do not have to like it. Thanks to canny production design, dubbing and camera effects, Argentinean filmmaking brothers Luciano and Nicolás Onetti

(*Sonno Profondo*) convincingly replicate the look and feel of 1970s Italian *gialli* with their second feature. Too bad they also replicate the horror subgenre's penchant for superficial characterization, spotty plotting and tendency to favour style over substance.



Francesca stars Luis Emilio Rodriguez as Inspector Bruno Moretti, a Roman detective charged with investigating a series of bizarre murders. The killer leaves coins on the eyes of the victims and notes at the crime scene quoting Dante Alighieri's *The Divine Comedy* that allude to their sins. Apparently the red-gloved killer is looking to cleanse society of its corrupt souls. Flashbacks indicate that the killer may be Francesca, the damaged daughter of a high-profile couple who disappeared some fifteen years earlier.

We do not know if the Onetti brothers used a checklist to create *Francesca*, but it sure seems like it. The music (by Luciano) often recalls Goblin's macabre prog rock. Scenes feature ancient technology – from typewriters to archaic reel-to-reel tape recorders – in order to recreate the time period. Even the title font replicates the feel of early '70s *gialli*. Then there are the genre tropes: creepy dolls, off-kilter angles, childhood trauma, sexual perversion, and, for complete authenticity, the Spanish cast's dialogue is dubbed into Italian.

For those horror fans who have seen all the major *gialli* produced in Italy in the '70s, *Francesca* is a worthy addition to your viewing experience. But beyond its value as an exercise in nostalgic style, what is there? The reveal of the villain is no big surprise, the twist-ending makes no sense, and the set pieces are hampered by a lack of gore, budget and imagination. The harsh reality is that *Francesca*, like the films





OVERLOOKED, FORGOTTEN AND DISMISSED

THIS ISSUE: LANCE MAKES APOLOGIES FOR ANTHOLOGIES

SHORT 'N' NOT-SO-SWEET



SCAREWAVES

Independent Entertainment

The best thing about horror anthologies is that each story is short, so if you get bored, fed up or mildly suicidal, just remember it'll be over soon. In *Scarewaves*, Amos Satan is a radio host wrapping up his last show, when he decides to spin four sick tales for a final thrill. Two of 'em are humdrum affairs about guys trying to kill their girlfriends, and there's a half-decent one about a former cop trying to live with the fact that he accidentally shot a child. The best of the bunch is a bizarre tale about an artist who preys upon his curvaceous models at the stroke of midnight, but that's only because of the gratuitous nudity. Sigh.

BODY COUNT: 13

BEST DEATH: Whacked with a baseball bat

KNOW WHEN TO FOLD 'EM



THE DARK DEALER

MVD Visual

Next we join a blackjack table where three men play for their souls against a demon with a deadly agenda. Each player has a tale: there's the Louisiana bluesman whose music was stolen by a record exec, the sadistic criminal who stumbles upon an eccentric old man with a terrible secret, and a kid who robs his dad's pharmaceutical company to impress his crackhead girlfriend. Originally released in 1995, *The Dark Dealer* is a cool throwback to what made horror movies so awesome in that era, including the laughable clothes (remember shoulder pads, girls?) and goofy special effects. If you want a fun dose of caro syrup and latex, this is definitely the film for you.

BODY COUNT: 7

BEST DEATH: Security guard ripped in half

DOUBTING THOMAS



TOM HOLLAND'S TWISTED TALES

Imagine Entertainment

I expect a lot from Tom Holland, the guy who brought us *Fright Night* and *Child's Play*. So when I saw that he made an anthology with a cast that included James Duval (*Donnie Darko*), Danielle Harris (various *Halloween* movies), Angela Bettis (*May*) and Ray Wise (*Twin Peaks*), I was in. Clocking in at 142 minutes, Holland cranks out nine uneven tales (made as online shorts) that range from thoroughly enjoyable ("Shockwave" and "Boom") to mind-numbingly awful ("Cached" and "To Hell With You") to what-the-fuck? ("The Pizza Guy" and "Vampire's Dance"). To turn this ordeal into a drinking game, just take a shot every time Tom introduces himself or you see a horror actor you vaguely recognize. Proost!

BODY COUNT: 20

BEST DEATH: Eaten by a giant worm

LAST CHANCE LANCE

that inspired it, looks great but does not stand up to scrutiny.

Peccato – that's Italian for "what a shame."

SEAN PLUMMER

OBTUSE SPOUSAL ABUSE

THE PERFECT HUSBAND

Starring Gabriella Wright, Bret Roberts and Carl Wharton

Directed by Lucas Pavetto

Written by Lucas Pavetto and Massimo Vavassori

Artsploitation Films

Losing a child is one of life's cruelest blows, and the grief of it can tear a couple apart. This psychological toll has been explored to gruesome effect in films as diverse as *Pet Sematary*, *Fetus* and *Antichrist*. The latter, notorious for the sex and violence presented in it, is but one obvious influence on Italian filmmaker Lucas Pavetto's feature-length, English-language revamp of his 2011 short film *The Perfect Husband*.

Viola (Gabriella Wright) reluctantly agrees to a weekend getaway with Nicola (Bret Roberts) at his uncle's remote mountain cabin to work on their troubled marriage. It's intimated in flashback vignettes that they're grieving the stillbirth of their first child. They bicker, hide vices from each other – him pills, her cigarettes – while trying to recapture their love (as an ominous presence seems to lurk on the periphery). After Viola accidentally knocks herself unconscious while fleeing in panic through the woods and is rescued by a forest ranger who happens upon her, Nicola accuses her of infidelity and attacks her with an axe. Escaping into the night, minus a couple of fingers, Viola flees for her life with her deranged husband in pursuit.

Pavetto aims for the slow burn – building tension through character development in the first half of the film to make the explosively violent second half emotionally resonant and consequently more horrific – but the actors have little material to work with and are just not up to the task. As a result, there is a lot of exquisite scenery and awkward interaction before Pavetto gets to the meat of the film: torture porn.

Viola allows herself to be handcuffed, on the pretense of a little kink in their lovemaking, but is instead burned with a cigarette, beaten and mutilated before escaping into the woods – only to be brutally raped by a random squatter in a completely gratuitous scene uncomfortably reminiscent of *Irreversible* (2002). Then all this cruelty is upended in a climactic twist straight out of *Haute Tension* (2003).

The Perfect Husband is as pretty as it is appalling and is well represented in high-definition. Extras include 26 minutes of backstage footage, the original six-minute short, and three trailers for other Artsploitation titles. It ain't no walk in the woods.

THE GORE-MET