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In this second of two parts (the first can be read here), I talk to writer/director/cinematographer Bart Mastronardi about his feature debut at the helm, VINDICATION (out on DVD April 13 from Big Bite Entertainment/R 2 Films).

SEAN ABLEY: VINDICATION is your first movie as a writer/director. Didn’t you tell me that you actually started making a cheap slasher years ago that morphed into this film?

BART MASTRONARDI: Yes, I began to make a bad low-budget slasher movie. Thank God, I didn’t. I am a proud daddy right now. VINDICATION is my first child. Like many first children, this one has been spoiled rotten. You see, I was going for my master’s degree, and I hated everything about graduate school. There was not an ounce of what I wanted there, so I decided if I quit, I was going to invest my money in a movie. By that point, I was already working as a DP, and doing grad school was pulling teeth out of my mouth at the time.

I began to make VINDICATION, and it resembled nothing like what it is today. I still have footage which doesn’t fit, but out of it grew this story that wanted to be told. I began to listen to my teachers and I wanted to work with talent. I knew I had a responsibility to the movie and to myself as a filmmaker. So many times I would walk out of movies feeling like, “I can do that.” Well, now was my time and I had to do it right, otherwise I was the failure. It would all fall on me, and I would have to go back to grad school.

I began to take the craft and art of filmmaking seriously. I went back and watched all the movies that inspired me, and reread all the classics of literature to figure out what made them so damn great. I read contemporaries and plays and all the things that make art so good. I wanted to emulate all that with VINDICATION. I wanted to make a horror movie that I would love to see. The trick was to do it on an extremely low budget. By this point, I was working with Alan Rowe Kelly and Stolis Hadjicharalambous shooting their films, and I shot mine with many of their actors. I would write parts for them and make sure they felt proud of it. I didn’t want a T&A horror movie. I wanted one with depth and emotion that took its time building up to the climax. I know that’s not the norm in today’s movies, but I felt I had to be true to the visions in my head.

VINDICATION pointed me in the right direction and knew itself. I had to explore that as a filmmaker. Yes, the movie talked to me. I saw inspiration everywhere—in books, movies, plays. That’s how I work as a filmmaker, and I’m proud of how the movie has turned out. It has been a long journey, but the film has been speaking for itself on many levels. VINDICATION is very personal to me, and judging from what I’ve heard from other people who have attempted suicide, this movie has struck a chord for them, too. I believe all artists/filmmakers need to do more soul-searching when practicing their craft to make whatever it is that much more believable.

ABLEY: VINDICATION took about three years to finish. How did you manage to keep the actors who appear throughout on board for such a long production period?

MASTRONARDI: Lots of begging! [*Laughs*] I had a great cast and crew who were dedicated and young and believed in the movie. It also helped that we were all working on each other’s movies. My biggest blessing was Keith Fraser, who plays Nicolas. Without Keith, I didn’t have a Nicolas or a movie; he portrayed the character perfectly. You see it all in his eyes. His performance is subtle, and that’s hard to pull off, because it has to be that much more believable. I felt bad when Keith didn’t receive any acting nominations [at festivals] while other cast members did, but Keith received great reviews from the critics who clearly saw what this young actor did.

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