How many slasher films have the balls to start off with the murder of a child? And not just any murder—strangling a little girl until she’s unconscious, ripping the cross from her neck, then lighting her body on fire.

And all this just minutes before her first communion.

ALICE, SWEET ALICE (a.k.a. COMMUNION and HOLY TERROR) is one of the best—and most atypical—slasher films ever made. First released in 1977 at the tail end of the Christian-panic fright trend (THE EXORCIST, THE OMEN) and created after director Alfred Sole was excommunicated from the Catholic Church, ALICE is a perfect storm of bloody mayhem and scathing religious commentary, a strange brew of heady family drama with the mean-spirited menace of Italian *gialli*.

Bottom line? It’s f**kin’ awesome.

The film opens with sisters Karen (Brooke Shields, in her first role) and Alice (Paula Sheppard) being brought over to Father Tom’s (Rudolph Wilrich) house in order for Karen to get a rosary for her first communion. You can already feel the tension in the family in the first scene as the girls’ mother, Catherine Spages (Linda Miller, in a great performance) treats Karen with more affection than the older Alice. Desperate for attention, Alice dons a mask and scares a housekeeper, then steals Karen’s doll and runs away with it. She’s a lonely, lost child who doesn’t get the attention she deserves.

All that changes, however, after Karen’s brutal murder, with suspicion falling squarely on the shoulders of Alice, who arrived at the church late, wearing her sister’s veil. Could a young girl truly be capable of such a crime? Or is something far more sinister going on? What follows is a harrowing portrait of a family dealing with the fallout of a child’s death, as well as a race to catch the vicious murderer before he or she strikes again.

What makes ALICE, SWEET ALICE work so well is its sheer refusal to adopt the normal slasher tropes. The film is extremely character-driven, so much so that most of the drama revolves around watching this family fall apart instead of a simple body count. The movie also eschews the plot progression of a typical stalker flick by telling us who the killer is halfway through the film, effectively turning this whodunit into a whydunit. Hell, the film even has a very pronounced message about the dangers of Catholic guilt and going too far with your beliefs.

While it’s definitely heady stuff, don’t let the complex, emotional story fool you; ALICE, SWEET ALICE is still a horror film at heart, and underneath all the window dressing, it still gives up the bloody goods. In fact, the film is incredibly mean in its violence, and one scene in particular—a brutal ankle stabbing on a staircase—never fails to make an audience wince in pain (especially if you manage to track down the mythical unrated version). There’s an inherent viciousness to the kills not often seen outside of early Dario Argento, and as the story ticks forward, so does the intensity of the murders. The nasty violence, intriguing mystery and great performances are anchored by an absolutely spellbinding score and visual style, both of which add to the movie’s eerie, dreamlike quality.

ALICE, SWEET ALICE is a fantastic, highly underrated slasher film that every genre fan should track down (preferably in its unrated form, if you can get ahold of it). Certain parts of it haven’t held up quite as well as the rest (I’d be remiss if I didn’t note that some scenes have a thick layer of ’70s cheese on them), but those who love disturbing violence backed by a good script and religious commentary need look no further.

{jcomments on}