

Fango Flashback: “HELL HIGH”

Written by Phil Castor

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By 1989, the slasher genre was declared officially dead. The idea of a deranged killer going on a killing spree had been done to death, and fans and critics alike were bored. However, it was at this point that a little slasher film was released that, unfortunately, fell through the cracks. HELL HIGH, directed and co-written by Douglas Grossman, is one of the more original examples of the subgenre; it follows the specific criteria, but at the same time adds new ingredients to the mix.

Science teacher Brooke Storm (Maureen Mooney) is still haunted by the deaths of two teens she accidentally caused as a young girl. She crosses into insanity when four high-schoolers—deranged delinquent Dickens (portrayed brilliantly by Christopher Stryker), Jon-Jon (Christopher Cousins), Queenie (Millie Prezioso) and Smiler (Jason Brill)—start harassing her and then attack her in her home. While the premise sounds like your typical killathon, the results are not.



First, there is no “final girl” left at the end of the film, but rather a final guy. Second, there is Jon-Jon, who is one of the best male screamers in horror history. Another noteworthy twist is that instead of an adult stalking teenagers, it is the teenagers who stalk and attack the adult, who only later turns the tables on her juvenile assailants. The film also touches on such hot-button subjects as lesbianism to teenage peer pressure.

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While it's common for big-name actors to get their start by being cast in horror flicks, HELL HIGH had the distinct honor of stalling some of its participants' careers. It was the only film that Grossman ever directed, and neither Prezioso nor Brill ever acted in another film. However, both Mooney and Cousins escaped the curse and had successful careers as soap opera stars. Mooney played Ann Jeffers on GUIDING LIGHT and Stacey Coles on ALL MY CHILDREN, while Cousins played Cain Rogan on ONE LIFE TO LIVE and has also had recurring roles on LIPSTICK JUNGLE, BREAKING BAD and the new FX show TERRIERS. Unfortunately, Stryker, who could have been the film's breakout star, died of AIDS on September 22, 1987 at age 27.

Also titled RAGING FURY and filmed as WHAT DO YOU WANT TO DO TONIGHT? in 1986, HELL HIGH wasn't released until 1989, which proved to be a fatal delay, and it was banished into genre-film obscurity. However, the fine folks at Media Blasters resurrected the movie on DVD back in 2004, with commentary by drive-in critic Joe Bob Briggs and Grossman himself. After 21 years of being suspended, HELL HIGH can now be rediscovered by a new generation of slasher fans for its originality and gruesome death scenes—and, 21 years later, it still speaks to the disenchanting youth of today. Like Dickens says in the film, “There's nothing after high school. There's only more stink.” Words to live by.

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