“Guilt has no mercy!” These words are the theme of the new fright film VINDICATION, created by New York-based writer/director/cinematographer Bart Mastronardi, which hits DVD next Tuesday, April 13 from R^2 Films on its Big Bite label. Guilt, madness and horror aside, with VINDICATION there is definitely no mercy.

Right from the start of this very dark film, there is almost no background music to accompany the ominous dialogue. Then again, life doesn’t have a soundtrack either. “I’m a really big fan of movies like HALF NELSON, BOYS DON’T CRY and REQUIEM FOR A DREAM, where music is only used when it is necessary,” Mastonardi notes. And when music and other audio FX became necessary to move along VINDICATION’s plot, Mastronardi didn’t miss a beat in adding those elements. “When I made the movie, the intent was always to have a good soundtrack,” he says. “I work at New York Film Academy on top of my other job, so I thought, ‘Let me take the money I make and I’ll invest in a really good sound mixer.’ I did and got Tom Burns, who also does Alan Rowe Kelly’s movies [THE BLOOD SHED, A FAR CRY FROM HOME]. Now we have really good sound for the DVD. The attitude I had was, the visuals were working and we had already accomplished that, so if we could just add strong audio and music, that would just enhance it all the more.”

So what does this chilling soundscape support? Well, VINDICATION is the complicated and brutal coming-of-age story of a young man named Nicolas (Keith Fraser). His life has been a series of painful incidents—from his mother dying while giving birth to him, to his father rejecting and blaming him for the tragedy, to the death of his girlfriend some time ago. The poor guy can’t find himself or decide what to do with his life and the pain enveloping him, so he buries the hurt

inside of him until it finally drives him insane.

“Nicolas becomes a monster,” Mastronardi explains, “and the madness sort of drives him in that direction. And then in the end, we look at him as a kid consumed with anger and frustration. But when he embraces all that, it sort of subsides, and it becomes easier for him to become more focused.”

Maybe so, but Nicolas’ new focus is scary as hell for anyone around him; it is true vindication for all his pain and suffering, and the movie becomes not only horrifying, but sad. “When I was writing the script, I derived a lot of it from Greek and Shakespearian tragedy,” Mastronardi says. “I wanted to bring this to a different level. And when I went to the Greek tragedies and did all the studies, it started to fuel the plot more than just all the personal information [he put into it].”

Since the movie has a very theatrical veneer, one wonders if Mastronardi would ever consider brining VINDICATION to the stage. “I would love to,” he says. “I grew up in the theater and much of my background comes from there, particularly community theater and Off-Broadway. I remember being fascinated by THE WHO’S TOMMY on Broadway as well. What a fantastic rock opera that is. They literally go inside Tommy’s mind. Those worlds were there, and when I did VINDICATION, I said, ‘Oh, this is similar, and I can draw from what they were doing in that.” I elaborated on that, so VINDICATION definitely has a theatrical feel, because I always felt that inside our heads is a different place than reality.”

Much of VINDICATION’s beauty, however, is in its stylized editing, which you can’t find in stage works. “That’s the separation between theater and cinema,” Mastronardi says. “I wanted to bring the two together, but be very clear that this is a motion picture. And with a movie, I can do the theatrical look with a very stylized, cinematic feel. When Nicolas attempts his suicide, it’s like a complete computer meltdown; his brain and body have finally had it, so we go completely

ballistic. That is the turning point in the film, and it was intended to be like the shower scene in PSYCHO—the moment where we had to drive the film to a whole new world. My editor, Stolis Hadjicharalambous, and I would sit together and work on it. He did such a beautiful and fantastic job.

“My intent was never to make this an Oedipal piece,” Mastronardi continues. “Even when we cut the scene where Nicolas is with his dead mother, I said, ‘Stolis, don’t cut to anything else unless you have to. Always keep on Cassandra.’ Zoe Daelman Chlanda [from BLOOD SHED and Kelly’s I’LL BURY YOU TOMORROW] does a beautiful job in the role. I told Stolis, ‘Don’t cut away, and if you do, don’t make harsh cuts.’ He and I went back and forth on it.”

VINDICATION is also a showcase for a group of talented cast and crew who are emerging out of the New York underground scene and slowly moving into the mainstream. The tightly knit group includes Kelly, who plays a blind seer in Mastronardi’s movie. “I remember telling Alan, ‘I’m going to write you a character for this movie,’ and that I needed a few weeks. I came up with a very trippy role. Jerry Murdock [as Nicolas’ father] is a brilliant actor. I love working with the man. He saw his character right away and was able to sum it up and actually be it. He tells his story through a monologue, and he knows how to deliver. As a filmmaker, they say 90 percent of your work is done if you cast it right, and with this really talented group of actors, and my crew, VINDICATION was able to come together.”

The unique thing about an indie filmmaking crew like the VINDICATION team is that they all changed hats during production. “That’s why it’s working out the way it is,” Mastronardi says. “In the years since we began as a group, we have all moved on, and our budgets are getting a little bit bigger now. We’re happy about that and we’re drawing from a bigger talent pool, with people like Debbie Rochon, [THE TEXAS CHAINSAW MASSACRE 2’s] Caroline Williams and [HAPPY BIRTHDAY TO ME’s] Lesleh Donaldson. These actresses are saying they want to work in the horror genre, but in projects that will really be worth their while. And I’m very happy that Alan’s films and mine are really speaking to these actors and the crewpeople; they’re saying, ‘We

really want to work with you, because we’re seeing substance here and not just a camera on a tripod and gratuitous nudity.’

“We respect each other’s process in the way we do things,” Mastronardi continues, “and realize we’re in for the long haul here, and it’s either do it our own way or we’ll have to do it the way the system wants. Our way is a bit more of a struggle financially, but I believe we’re going about it correctly. And by sticking together, if everybody likes what we’re doing right now, we’ll eventually break out of what you would call that microbudget aspect. I would love for the horror genre to go into a different direction, because what we’re seeing very often is the same stories and the easy way of doing things. I tell my students all the time that it’s very easy to put a camera on a tripod and get a shot. Anybody can do that. But *why* you’re telling your story the way you’re telling it—that’s what is going to separate you from other filmmakers. At this point in the genre, you have to reach out a little bit further than a guy in a hockey mask with a machete. I love FRIDAY THE 13TH-type movies, but my biggest wish is that they would go a little bit more in an emotional direction.”

To date, VINDICATION (which has been endorsed by none other than Clive Barker) has won Best Picture, Best Director, Best Supporting Actor and Best Blood at several indie festivals, and was accepted into nine such events in the last year alone. “Once we come out [on disc], I’m going to let it tour the festivals again and get the word out once more,” Mastronardi says. “Let the people see it, and hopefully they can start buying it and we’ll take it from there.”

See FANGORIA #292, on sale this month, for more on VINDICATION.

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