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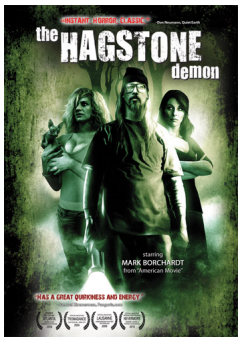
Usually, when independent horror folks compare their features to George A. Romero’s DAWN OF THE DEAD, they speak in terms of bloody, visceral explicitness. But not Mark Borchardt, the subject of the popular documentary AMERICAN MOVIE, who compares the new supernatural flick THE HAGSTONE DEMON (in which he stars for director/co-writer Jon Springer) to the zombie master in different terms.

“The unique thing about Romero’s films is that you can see, in his compositions and editing, this huge allegiance to craftsmanship,” he says. “They were in low-budget circumstances using what they had, and that essentially dictated a sense of reality, because that’s what they had to deal with. With a bigger budget, suddenly you have to light it differently, you have actors who look like actors, you have clothing that looks like costuming and so forth, just because it goes with the territory. At the beginning of DAWN OF THE DEAD, if they’d had a huge amount of money, they would have said, ‘Listen, man, let’s start with these car crashes and this army of zombies and let’s just *hit* the audience.’ But instead, it’s the most beautiful thing: The credits appear over something, and you don’t know what the hell it is—some red organic thing—and all of a sudden it zooms out and it’s a *carpeted wall*, and it’s, like, mind-blowing! The world needs more red-carpeted walls, man.”



There are no red-carpeted walls to be seen, however, in HAGSTONE DEMON, which makes its special-edition DVDebut tomorrow from Pacific Entertainment. Shot largely in black and white with occasional moments of color, the movie stars Borchardt as Douglas Elmore, who’s reeling from the suicide of his wife Julie. When he takes a job as caretaker of the Hagstone apartment building, which is slated for demolition, he becomes haunted by Julie’s specter—and plagued by a series of murders of the remaining tenants. The story is told via the same simple yet accomplished aesthetic that Borchardt appreciates in Romero’s *oeuvre*, and that he enjoyed while collaborating with Springer.

“Jon is a very balanced, serious filmmaker,” Borchardt says. “He has an appreciation of humor that comes out in subtle moments; there’s no laugh track going on at the surface of his life, but every once in a while he appreciates a funny circumstance. It was an evenly balanced shoot—there were no tumultuous situations, or deserts of laxity either. This type of even filmmaking, man…it’s a good thing for the soul to ingest.”

Springer, who scripted THE HAGSTONE DEMON with Harrison Matthews and also served as cinematographer and editor, had previously cast Borchardt in LIVING DEAD GIRL, one of several genre shorts he made before tackling the new feature. Like his star, he values the idea of turning budgetary restrictions into an advantage instead of an obstacle. “Instead of letting the low-budget reality force some kind of compromise in terms of the effects or the storytelling,” the director says, “we instead channeled those limitations toward greater innovation and ingenuity. And I was lucky enough to find very talented people who were willing to put themselves out there in that regard. Obviously you can’t take such an approach with just anyone; you need a skilled crew who can deliver a functioning solution under pressure, with little or no resources to do so.”

As an example, he cites a scene in which he asked production designer and special FX supervisor Mike Etoll to come up with a spur-of-the-moment practical gag. “We were shooting the scene in the alley were Nadine Gross hands off this plastic baggie to Jay Smiley,” he explains, “and suddenly I had this idea that there should be something alive in the baggie, as if there was an organism or animal squirming around in there. I asked Mike if he could create such an effect in the next 10 minutes. He started digging through a dumpster right there in the alley, and within 10 minutes had constructed an armature with a bubble-wrap protrusion and a working tendon that allowed him to manipulate the protrusion with jerky, lifelike movements. We slipped the armature into the baggie, and Mike operated the armature manually from behind Nadine—through her coat—and I was able to frame him out of the shot. The effect is convincing, but beyond that it creates a certain feel that would have been different had it been done another way.”

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