

## “SEA OF DUST” (DVD Review)

Written by Mike Watt

Thursday, 19 August 2010 08:51

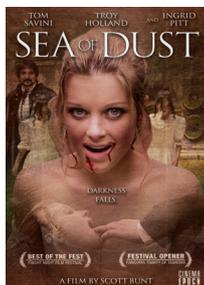
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Midway through SEA OF DUST (now on DVD from Cinema Epoch), two characters make the horrifying discovery that a wounded woman under their care has been hollowed out by the malevolent force they're fighting. Her empty body is walking around under his influence, empty of bones, organs and, possibly, soul. If you take this idea and reverse it, you will have the perfect metaphor for Scott Bunt's directorial debut: a movie stuffed full of ideas, but wrapped in a shell almost too flimsy to contain it.

To call the film ambitious would not only be an understatement, but a disservice. At once a black slapstick comedy, a twisted horror tale, a stylish period piece and a biting religious satire, SEA OF DUST's parts exceed the whole, but not for lack of energy, affection or devotion on the parts of its creators.

What should have been the best day in young medical intern Stefan Christoph's (Troy Holland) life becomes a living nightmare. After the humiliating denial of the right to marry a rich man's daughter, Stefan discovers a young woman unconscious on the road through the Black Forest. Taking her immediately to a local doctor, he learns that the surrounding village has been under attack by a malevolent invisible force. Already, two young women have died as a result of this intrusion; cause of death is often cranial explosion (one of which the viewer witnesses in the film's first minute).



The village girl, Carla (Darby Lynn Totten), rises as if in thrall and stabs Stefan with a knife that the doctor swears he'd had locked away. When she breaks from her reverie, she tells the young intern that he's been chosen by the mythological Christian king Prester John (Tom Savini) to be his conduit to our reality. Belief in Prester John, a creation of the Catholic Church to encourage a continuation of the Crusades centuries before, has fallen out of favor, but he still exists in his

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realm as an ideology, and he wishes to regain his foothold on Earth once again, and to spread his own gospel of salvation through suffering.

Constantly shuttled back and forth through the barrier between Prester John’s world and ours (the titular “Sea of Dust”), Stefan is compelled to stop this manifestation of religious/political control from building his army of hollow acolytes. Joining forces with his mentor, Professor Sorell (*anime* voiceover staple Bill Timoney, who’s terrific), Dr. Maitland (Edward X. Young, less terrific but very imposing) and the living gateway, Carla, Stefan sets out to defeat Prester John without knowing how. After all, how do you stop an idea?

Widely uneven in pace and tone, SEA OF DUST does its best to wake up the horror fan lulled into a comatose fugue state by endless sequels and remakes. Bunt and his wife/executive producer Pauline set out with a cartload of influences. By Bunt’s own admission, SEA OF DUST begins as an homage to mid-history Hammer films—CAPTAIN KRONOS: VAMPIRE HUNTER and COUNTESS DRACULA particularly come to mind, and not just because of the presence of a still-striking Ingrid Pitt in a supporting role)—and ’60s-era Mario Bava, and Brian Fass’ cinematography ably evokes that era with saturated colors and warm photography. But then, Bunt and co. will occasionally throw the viewer a curveball in the manner of, for example, an EVIL DEAD II-esque slapstick villager attack that turns very gory (genre starlet Suzi Lorraine features prominently in this sequence). Added to this is Savini as the otherworldly Prester John, decked out like Christopher Lee’s Dracula, right down to the satin-lined cape. He keeps a Jess Franco-esque torture chamber in his museum-lair dungeon, fully equipped with a leather-clad, flesheating harpy.

Bunt’s script keeps the concepts coming hard and fast, and it isn’t afraid to admit when the characters are completely in over their heads. There’s no easy answer as to how to stop Prester John, and several attempts are utter failures—but not due to plot weakness. SEA OF DUST demands viewer participation, not passive spectatorship, so if you get lost along the way, it’s as much your fault as it is the movie’s.

Miraculously, however, the film’s budgetary drawbacks and Bunt’s inexperience actually work in SEA OF DUST’s favor. The quick shifts in tone and occasional awkward transitions contribute to the movie’s dream-logic quality, adding a surface layer of Lovecraftian surrealism. Whether the parallels to Lovecraft’s “Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath” are intentional or not, the influence is present and adds to the viewer’s disjointed confusion. Any flaws in the craftsmanship—present in any movie of any budget—actually fit comfortably back into SEA as a whole, sitting alongside the very places where the movie succeeds. Given the ambiguous ending and already-present “what is real” structure, nothing ultimately feels like a mistake. If an

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occasional line is delivered stiffly or a continuity flaw is detected, the cooperative viewer can incorporate them into the overall experience. If a wound is present on one side of the Sea of Dust, but not the other, was it actually inflicted? Is this wooden performance by a supporting character inexperience, or deliberate due to the character’s influence from Prester John?

All of these elements, successful and less so, make up the whole of the SEA OF DUST experience. And by the time the credits roll, few audience members will be able to say that, despite the aforementioned influences, they’ve ever seen anything quite like it.

Cinema Epoch’s DVD presents a clean, beautiful widescreen transfer, fully showcasing Fass’ photography. The special features are the usual fare of audio commentary and a trio of deleted scenes (also with optional commentary), as well as an insightful behind-the-scenes documentary that feels less EPK than the typical studio featurette. While some of the info in this extra is repeated on Bunt’s commentary track—the inspiration for the story, for instance, and the filmmaker’s fascination with the origin of Prester John (which basically boils down to Catholic Church war propaganda)—there are brief but nice moments with Pitt, who expresses her enthusiasm for the script and recalls how she “demanded” that her agent get in touch with Bunt so she could play in the film, and an interesting (though strangely lower-quality) interview with Savini where he talks about his time as a Vietnam war photographer as well as how he prepared for his role as Prester John.

On the whole, the bonus features merely bespeak a dedicated cast and crew who fell in love with Bunt’s vision. It’s always nice to watch these things accompanying indie productions, since you know it’s genuine and not scripted studio PR.

While it’s trite to end a review with “for the viewer looking for something different,” that’s precisely who SEA OF DUST is intended for. If you’ve felt buried recently by the onslaught of low-budget slasher movies or glittering vampires, pick up a movie that feels like some thought went into it—one that asks the same of you.

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DVD PACKAGE: 🍷🍷🍷👤

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