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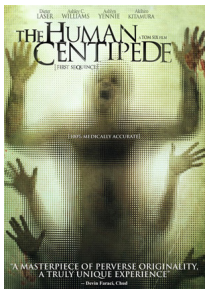
Monday, 04 October 2010 14:59

You have already seen THE HUMAN CENTIPEDE. Regardless of whether or not you’ve actually watched the film itself, the movie you’ve conjured up within your imagination has undoubtedly been playing on heavy rotation in your own cerebral cineplex ever since you first heard of Tom Six’s moderately controversial high-concept monstrosity. Now here’s the rub: The film you’ve made in your mind is far gorier, far more grotesque and potentially far better than the one Six committed to celluloid.

With the DVD and Blu-ray releases of the unrated director’s cut upon us via IFC and MPI, this seems as good a time as any to reflect upon the film that got *Entertainment Weekly* to gush, “Is this the most disgusting horror film of all time?” Clearly—no. Quite the contrary. It’s a SERBIAN world out there. SALO reins supreme. But this particular critic would like to argue that the horror genre needs some CENTIPEDEs now and then, at least THE FIRST SEQUENCE, even if that means defending the film from the film itself…



CENTIPEDE has a near-perfect elevator pitch: A mad doctor (Dieter Laser) fuses three victims (Akihiro Kitamura, Ashley C. Williams, and Ashlynn Yennie, respectively, as the first, middle and final parts) together in the most heinous of ways, creating a perverse work of art: the world’s first “human centipede.” Each victim loses their own individuality to become part of a larger whole, their sense of autonomy subsumed as “segments” to an entirely new, completely functional entity. Though they remain self-aware, this depraved operation forces them to now exist as a singular organism to survive—while its creator, oddly paternal and depraved all at once, attempts to potty-train his newborn atrocity.

When the trailer for CENTIPEDE slithered onto the Internet earlier this year, there was no stopping this monstrous meme from overtaking every proverbial water-cooler conversation. This

cinematic perversion penetrated the pop-cultural consciousness deep enough to extend beyond the standard chat-room banter, tapping into something far more mainstream than any discourse we mere film geeks could hold dominion over. *New York* magazine listed it on their “Approval Matrix.” A CENTIPEDE gag from TV’s THE COLBERT REPORT was broadcast during the Emmys. A porn parody, THE HUMAN SEXAPEDE, pays homage to the original’s *ménage a trois* sequencing. YouTube is peppered with homemade movies of human centipedes milling around assorted households. Civilians—not just horror fans, but everyday citizens beyond the genre—took part in turning THE HUMAN CENTIPEDE into a word-of-(ass-to-)mouth phenomenon.

So—what were they all saying? That CENTIPEDE is the sickest, vilest, most horrific, most sadistic, most twisted, most depraved film ever made.

In this, Six has pulled off his cleverest deception. What is most surprising about CENTIPEDE itself is how chaste the film truly is. Devotees of decapitations and excess violence will come away feeling cheated. Viewers who brace themselves for the most morally repugnant onscreen acts will be stunned to discover a film that doesn’t live up to their expectations. There is no gratuitous nudity, no overtly explicit violence. Beyond the actual concept of creating a human centipede, much of the horror happens off-camera—leaving it up to audiences’ imaginations to envision the worst.

And they have. And continue to.

Six has done the unthinkable—or more to the point, the improbable: He has created an engaging concept that transcends the very film that encapsulates that concept.

There is much to admire about CENTIPEDE. Shot with a cool anesthetic sensibility, the feel of the film itself is rather mechanical. The camera moves with a smooth geometry that testifies to Six’s strength behind the lens—a sharp contrast to the crude and clumsy stumblings of his creature, calling to mind those first few baby steps of Boris Karloff in James Wales’ FRANKENSTEIN. High praise for a movie that boasts a monster comprised of a couple of club kids puckered up to each others’ buttholes, for sure—but CENTIPEDE is the BRIDE OF FRANKENSTEIN for an apathetic era immersed in Paris Hilton ennui.

Particular praise should be heaped upon Ashley C. Williams for her portrayal of the middle segment. Her performance is the true standout here, endowing her role with a certain level of timid emotion that transcends the standard girl-in-peril pratfalls—*sans* speech, independent movement and all the physical advantages that, say, Marilyn Burns had when defending herself against her cannibalistically inclined hosts in TEXAS CHAINSAW MASSACRE. For a generation of viewers raised in the era of scream queens, CENTIPEDE poses an interesting question: *What if your scream queen can’t actually scream?*
The emotional toll that this torture takes on the human spirit is clearly articulated in Williams’ minimalist expressions. This is agony refined, relegated to whimpers and blinks. To convey so much with so little is a true achievement—and Williams should receive her laurels for delivering a role that will surely reach true levels of infamy.

But where does CENTIPEDE fit within the horror spectrum? Do the standard slasher/torture-porn/biohorror demarcations apply? Certain critics were quick to measure CENTIPEDE against the early body-horror works of David Cronenberg, such as THE BROOD and RABID—but comparisons to that director seem wildly inappropriate (and offensive to Cronenberg fans such as myself). The most disappointing aspect to CENTIPEDE is that Six seems content with his concept to leave well enough alone, refusing to do anything more than deliver a simple one-two joke setup. The punchline is good—and Six clearly knows it. But rather than explore any of the multiple themes CENTIPEDE hints at, such as the slight suggestion of WWII revisionism, Six comes off as a kid with a brand new toy who refuses to read the directions, unaware that he hasn’t even flipped the On switch yet.

To truly appreciate THE HUMAN CENTIPEDE for all its promises of provocation, one should not see the movie at all. As cynical as that sounds, the intention is out of defensive preservation for the *idea* behind the film more than anything else. Put frankly, the film Six has created cannot compete with the self-conjured atrocities of the viewer’s own imagination. But what a film we’ve all collectively made! The power of CENTIPEDE’s premise alone is enough to resonate in our minds far longer than the film itself, so—why not quit while we’re ahead? The bar has been raised in our brains. What could ultimately match that? The double-edged sword for Six is that he has created a horrifying new monster for our modern times—but not the film, unfortunately.

The true exploitation film awaits viewers within CENTIPEDE’s disc extras. Recordings of casting sessions with stars Williams and Yennie provide a fly-on-the-wall perspective of just how awkward those first few auditions must have been. Never has a callback been so frightening for an actress before. A single deleted scene showcases a Laser soft-shoe, cute and unfortunately cut from the actual film. Once again, we are privy to the level of physical duress our three segments had to endure on set—suggesting that the true sadist of the film was Six himself, subjecting his stars to hours of strenuous ass-kissing.

But the most compelling—and completely disgusting—of the extras is a home-movie recording of CENTIPEDE’s 16-hour foley session. We come upon our bare-chested sound designer as he is about to embark upon a marathon of flesh-tearing and bone-breaking. His setup is more reminiscent of a slaughterhouse than a sound FX lab, complete with chicken necks, German sausage, cattle hooves and other various raw meats ready to be eviscerated. When he pulls out a sheep’s head with his bare hands—flayed of its skin, eyeballs still plunged in their sockets, tongue dangling from its mouth—one can’t help but wonder if the real horror of THE HUMAN CENTIPEDE is the behind-the-scenes footage rather than the actual movie.

A gallery view of alternate posters just goes to show the final decision was the right one, while an audio commentary finds a gleeful Six spilling his thoughts for those eager to listen about the physical rigors of puckering up to a prosthetic rendering of your fellow castmate’s butthole. A separate interview with Six offers a couple of candid moments regarding CENTIPEDE, most notably the genesis-point for such an uncomfortable configuration—while dropping a genuine cherry on top of this ample set of bonus features: confirmation that preproduction is well underway for the sequel. Fans can expect a FULL SEQUENCE this time, complete with 12 unwilling participants. Avoid the casting couch for this one, gang…

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