

## “THE SLUMBER PARTY MASSACRE Collection” (DVD Review)

Written by Michael Gingold

Friday, 19 November 2010 14:06

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The three-part documentary that's one of the centerpieces of Shout! Factory's SLUMBER PARTY MASSACRE Collection opens with Christmas-morning footage of a preteen Tony Brown (webmaster of the SLUMBER PARTY fan site The Old Hockstatter Place and one of the Collection's contributors) unwrapping a VHS copy of the first in the film franchise, and literally screaming with excitement. It's a good thing it wasn't this two-DVD set he received, or the poor kid might have had a coronary.

This entry in Shout!'s Roger Corman's Cult Classics series is the ultimate exhaustive tribute to the trifecta of driller-killer movies that have amassed a cult following since their releases in the 1980s. Part of the first SLUMBER PARTY's notoriety, from its release in 1982 till today, has to do with the presence of feminist author Rita Mae Brown as its credited scriptwriter—although, as is revealed among the Collection's supplements, director Amy Jones significantly rewrote Brown's draft (titled DON'T OPEN THE DOOR) after she literally took it off producer Corman's shelf and chose it as her feature debut.



One key facet of Brown's initial screenplay that survived to become the defining element of all three SLUMBER PARTY movies was its central weapon: a huge portable drill wielded by the maniac (named "Russ Thorn," nudge nudge) that bluntly literalizes the Freudianism that could be read into the slasher genre's fascination with long blades entering female flesh. This is also one of the few parts of the first film where any sort of feminist subtext can truly be read. Yes, there's a resourceful good girl who overcomes the villain, but almost all the post-HALLOWEEN stalker flicks had one of those, and the rest of the femme characters do the same stuff as all their counterparts in other teen-kill movies: hang out in their underwear or less, talk about sex and exhibit less-than-stellar survival instincts when the maniac comes calling. Their dialogue is occasionally wittier than usual (Jones says one of her key contributions was adding humor to the horrific mix), but otherwise, THE SLUMBER PARTY MASSACRE isn't quite as distinct from its many bloody brethren as it (and its more devoted followers) seems to think it is.

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There's actually a little bit more going on under the surface of 1987's *SLUMBER PARTY MASSACRE II*, at least in the early going. Surviving little sister Courtney, played by Jennifer Meyers in the previous film, is now played by Crystal Bernard (future *WINGS* star, and the actress who had the brightest subsequent career of any of the *SLUMBER* starlets). Part of an all-girl rock band, she's haunted by dreams of another Driller Killer whose weapon is affixed to a guitar, and for a little while, writer/director Deborah Brock seems to be getting at some promising themes dealing with anxiety about sex and its ties to rock 'n' roll.

Then that villain (played by the improbably named Atanas Ilitch) emerges into reality, coming on like a demonic Andrew Dice Clay crossed with Elvis and dropping Freddy Krueger-style one-liners, and the movie becomes just another over-the-top death-fest, with horrific setpieces (most notably a giant exploding zit) as garish as the late-'80s fashions and hairstyles. Ilitch's musical madman is certainly not your typical body-count bogeyman, though whether you find his antics amusing or annoying will be up to individual taste.

And the less said about 1990's *SLUMBER PARTY MASSACRE III*, the better. Despite also having women at the helm (director Sally Mattison and writer/producer Catherine Cyran), this one—the return of the drill notwithstanding—is indistinguishable from the dozens of other direct-to-video killathons being churned out at the time.

That feeling is exacerbated by the fact that *SLUMBER III* is presented in fullscreen in the DVD set, with an image that looks only a step or two up from its original VHS incarnation. The first pair of films are given the anamorphic widescreen treatment and are more visually pleasing, though the transfers don't entirely overcome the low-budget flaws inherent in the original materials. All three bear acceptable 2.0 soundtracks and, more notably, each comes with audio commentary by assorted participants, all moderated by Brown.

Jones is joined on the first movie by actors Michael Vilella (who played Thorn), Debra Deliso and, briefly, Brinke Stevens (who doesn't address Brown's assertion that she originally had the lead role). Where are stars Robin Stille, Michelle Michaels and Meyers? Well, apparently the latter two couldn't be located, and Stille, tragically, committed suicide in 1996. Not surprisingly, there's a good deal of discussion about overcoming budgetary limitations along with other production detail, while Jones admits she studied *FRIDAY THE 13TH* and similar movies to get pointers, and notes (to the likely surprise of no one who's seen *SLUMBER PARTY*) that her composer brother Ralph created the score on a “small Casio synthesizer.” Perhaps most eye-opening is Vilella's recollection of his very in-depth process for his murderous role—which

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included modeling his physical movements on a peacock!

Brock and producer Don Daniel do the lion's share of the SLUMBER PARTY II track, with actress Juliette Cummins and story editor Beverly Gray eventually getting a few words in edgewise. The best parts of their talk have to do with how the filmmakers dealt with Corman's visits to the set and problems with a troublemaking stuntman and more literal pests: roaches that crept over from the concurrently shooting THE NEST. We also learn some surprising things about the life and background of Driller Killer actor Ilitch. On SLUMBER PARTY III, Mattison, Gray and actresses Brandi Burkett and Hope Marie Carlton make listening to the commentary a lot more fun than watching the movie; their memories are often very funny, as is the interplay between them.

The aforementioned documentary, SLEEPLESS NIGHTS (named for one of the first film's early titles), devotes about 20 minutes to each film, and director Jason Paul Collum has assembled a surprisingly wide spectrum of interviewees for each segment, including several not involved in the commentaries. (And wait'll you see how different Villella looks now from then.) That allows for a good variety of fresh stories and observations, and there's entertaining video addenda as well—most notably a visit to the house where the original SLUMBER PARTY was lensed, which is still owned by the same couple! Everybody involved retains positive memories of the respective productions, though Mattison remains dubious about one particular SLUMBER PARTY III murder—a reshoot scene which veers uncomfortably close to rape.

Throughout the assorted interviews and commentaries, the SLUMBER PARTY films' feminist sides (or lack thereof) are only briefly touched on, though the subject of nudity—performing it and shooting it—comes up a lot. Nor is the fact that this was a uniquely women-guided fright franchise discussed much; the directors consider their experiences more in terms of simply being up-and-coming filmmakers looking for the kind of break a genre film can provide. Trailers for each movie are also provided, along with still galleries, plus one for the SLUMBER PARTY II poster shoot—in which, like the one-sheet for its predecessor, the girls involved are not the same actresses from the movie itself.

OVERALL RATING: \*\*\*

{comments on}

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