Written by Trevor Parker
Monday, 06 December 2010 14:19

One of the more fun aspects of being a fright fan is seeing distinctly American horror subgenres digested and regurgitated by international directors. From classy French slasher fare to Norwegian zombie havoc—familiar tropes flavored with unique cultural inflections can make for some exciting cinema. Now, we have an Icelandic take on survival horror, shot in English and cumbersomely titled HARPOON: WHALE WATCHING MASSACRE (out this week on DVD and Blu-ray from Image Entertainment).

Rather than another backwoods hillbilly clan terrorizing a deserted rural setting, HARPOON (previously titled REYKJAVIK WHALE WATCHING MASSACRE) takes a nautical approach. It confines the action to two atmospheric old fishing hulks, the deranged family in question having honed their bloodletting skills on the whaling docks of Reykjavik rather than cattle farms or slaughterhouses.

HARPOON begins on familiar waters, with scattered scenes of partiers enjoying themselves at a nightclub while an awesomely terrible band clamors away in the background. One of these clubgoers is Annette, who is scheduled to leave town on a whale-watching tour early the next morning. Hung over and barely managing to catch the boat before it leaves, Annette is soon standing helplessly aside as the ship’s captain is badly injured in an accident. The tourists are then left stranded at sea—at least, until a fishing vessel arrives and offers to lead the group to

dubious safety…

Throughout HARPOON, there is an underlying anger about foreign pressures resulting in the loss of a traditional Icelandic industry, namely the commercial harvest of whales. Our murderous family claims to be descended from a long line of whalers, and there is a sly moment in which they hack up an environmentally minded victim who pleads, “You can’t do this… I’m a friend of nature!” There’s also a great scene with some misguided granola twits sitting around and decrying the practice of whale watching, reasoning that whales “don’t enjoy being stared at.”

Also working in HARPOON’s favor is the doomed tour group itself, featuring a refreshing range of ages and nationalities instead of the stock assortment of teens with whom we’re usually presented in an affair like this one. The filmmakers take the time to throw some unexpected character twists among them along the way, although the killer clan (a bloodthirsty mother barking orders, a quietly threatening brute and a simpering, whiny pervert) are interchangeable with most other survival-horror villains. The movie does deserve credit for dispensing with the now-tired routine of the family pretending they’re harmless eccentrics until deciding to pounce; here, they get down to bloody business within seconds of encountering the tourists. The ill-fated tour captain is played by Gunnar Hansen of THE TEXAS CHAINSAW MASSACRE fame—who, with his Santa-esque beard and physical proportions, must now be awarded the title of cuddliest horror icon. Hansen is top-billed on the disc packaging, but it would be stretching to describe his appearance as anything more than an extended cameo. Still, the casting is a nice tip of the saw to HARPOON’s predatory predecessors.

Unfortunately, just as HARPOON has imported some good aspects of its U.S. inspirations, it also manages to reel in many of the bad. Characters make those bafflingly numbskull decisions that have viewers slapping their foreheads (turning your back on a KO’ed baddie is one thing, but leaving his loaded gun lying next to him?). The pacing lags badly in the first third; too much time is devoted to people who aren’t half as interesting as the filmmakers think they are, and the audience is left ticking away the long minutes until the action ramps up. Toward the climax, director Julius Kemp makes an ambitious mistake and oversteps his limited budget with a laughable sequence involving a life raft and an animatronic killer whale.

The Blu-ray’s 2.35:1 transfer has been cruel to HARPOON, which is left looking grainy and underlit in hi-def. All three discs (the Blu-ray and R and unrated DVDs) include a trailer and a forgettable short featurette in which some standard behind-the-scenes antics are interspersed with new Hansen interview snippets. In the end, HARPOON manages to be a serviceable thriller, but with many missteps counteracting its innovations. What’s Icelandic for “mediocre”?

MOVIE: 💀💀💀💀

DISC PACKAGE: 💀💀💀💀

{jcomments on}