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I’d be lying if I told you I’ve never experienced a period of academic overextension at some point or another. In this regard, the predicament Dana (Lydia Chandler) faces in DISMAL (on DVD from Cinema Epoch) provided a kind of instant sympathy. The class in which she’s stuck, and that she can’t stand or care to invest in, is Biology, and the option of extra credit becomes something of a desperate necessity. The movie, then, *could* be a forewarning about the perils of procrastination, with some pertinent circumstances. But for now, I’ll turn off my imagination (as the movie commands us) and get to telling what actually happens.

To help ensure a passing grade, Dana follows the suggestion of her teaching assistant Curt (Tim Morris) to join him and three other classmates on an outdoors expedition to The Great Dismal Swamp. Considering a barely dressed, hourly-paid prostitute (Meagan Reedy) is permitted to join the bunch, it’s no secret that the trip is a charade as far as academic value is concerned. For good measure, we’ve also been made aware in a pre-title sequence that a hint of cannibalism—presumably by the locals of the remote region—is afoot. Is this all a setup for material we’ve seen a dozen times before? Yes. Can this all still be infectious enough to carry through a solid B-effort? So far, yes.

DISMAL is loaded with stock characters, genre tropes and clichés that serve no other purpose than to maneuver it to its prepackaged checkpoints, but occasionally the movie throws out moments that skirt the aforementioned categories. For instance, have you ever seen romantic flirtation cultivated through the dissection of a gigantic worm? A time-lapse montage of facial expressions all in reaction to fellatio? A 20-second extreme close-up of a decapitation by bear trap? Scripter Bo Buckley and director Gary King establish most of these kids as hapless, two-dimensional, bumbling idiots. They have the best of intentions but meet the fates they deserve, and there’s something admirable about that. The group’s camping trip is as campy as camp can get—about as campy as this now-tired “camp” double entendre. It’s easy enough to take these cues to expect nothing more or less than a sleazy gore-’n’-lure-fest; for a while, that’s all DISMAL aspires to be, and for a while, I enjoyed it.

Then something happened.

In the second half, matters suddenly jump from cartoonish exploitation to grueling sadism, but the leap of faith necessary to make such a transition essentially becomes impossible. Bill Oberst Jr. dives in headfirst as local sheriff/redneck head honcho Dale, aiming with fiendish precision to make us saddened and repulsed as each of his victims’ lives end up in his hands. To presume this guy was going Method must be an understatement; it would seem he hasn’t seen a single frame of the movie he’s in. The unrestrained cruelty of Oberst’s performance is brash and unrelenting, but it doesn’t belong in a film like DISMAL. It’s as if the director dropped Bill McKinney from DELIVERANCE into FRIDAY THE 13TH PART 2 and expected us not to do a double take. When we’re first introduced to Jack Harrison (billed simply as “Idiot”) alongside Dale, terrorizing the bunch, groaning in toothless, crude, mentally handicapped caricature, it’s a reminder that there can only be one Michael Berryman. The film’s inexplicable “twist” ending, it seems, can be a result of only two things: a classic, copout reliance on stock resolution, or a last-minute excuse for Morris’ truly grating lead performance.

How to rate DISMAL? I could go on about how one climactic fireball looks like it was created with Microsoft Paint ’99, or how each kill is uninventive, one even plagiarized (*erh-hem*, FINAL DESTINATION 2). If you demand such spectacles be presented in enhanced widescreen with Dolby Digital sound, this DVD will show you your lucky day, though the special-features cupboard is bare.

But it’s not the film’s low-rent camp factor that threw me in the slightest—it’s that DISMAL is a movie where tone is apparently no factor. It’s the kind of film where you can neither laugh at the violence on screen nor be horrified by it, but instead only feel annoyed and cheated. You want a wild, lurid day at the swamp? You’ve got it…so long as you switch off after 45 minutes.

{jcomments on}