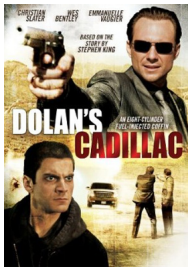
“When he grins, birds fall off telephone lines,” says DOLAN’S CADILLAC hero Robinson (Wes Bentley) of his nemesis Jimmy Dolan, in narration *not* lifted from the Stephen King story on which the film is based. “When he looks at you a certain way, your prostate goes bad and your urine burns. The grass yellows up and dies where he spits… He has the name of a thousand demons.” But when we see this hellish fiend, he turns out to be…Christian Slater, who still can’t help looking like a kid playing dress-up when he dons the finery of this malevolent underworld figure.

While they share the basics of narrative and character, King’s original is decidedly a horror tale, and the movie (on DVD and Blu-ray next week from National Entertainment Media) is not. Both follow Robinson, a schoolteacher with no previous proclivity toward violence, as he plots and executes revenge against Dolan, a Las Vegas gangster who murdered his wife before she could testify about a crime of Dolan’s that she had witnessed. King’s focus is on the execution, and the author weaves a psychologically dense, torturously detailed first-person account of the physical punishment Robinson puts himself through to pull off his plan. This grotesque self-abuse, motivated by his undying love for—and the recurring specter of—Elizabeth, is as grueling as anything undergone by the victims in the SAW films, and makes for a white-knuckle read.




The movie—directed by Jeff Beesley from a script by Richard Dooling—inevitably expands the story to put more emphasis on the buildup, and emerges as an unexceptional revenge saga that paints an unpersuasive portrait of an ordinary man driven to vengeful extremes by the traumatic loss of his loved one. Overweight and balding in King’s conception, Robinson is now the trim and handsome Bentley (hey, that kind of change worked for PSYCHO, right?), and the actor here lacks the gravitas and intensity to give the movie the necessary emotional heft. He goes through similar motions to the literary Robinson, but the same depth of obsession doesn’t come through. And both Slater’s casting and the reconception of Dolan’s role result in a villain who’s more of a two-bit thug than a powerful mob boss and doesn’t resonate as the mythic human

monster Robinson describes, and who could give the tale an extra, operatic dimension. Anyone familiar with CADILLAC’s near-decade in development, during which it went through at least two other directors, can only think that previously announced Gabriel Byrne or Dennis Hopper or even Sylvester Stallone would have registered more strongly in the part.

Ironically, this expansion of King’s tale results in what feels like a compression of the time over which it takes place; Robinson speaks of the years he’s spent watching Dolan and planning his vengeance, but you don’t really feel them. And while genre regular Emmanuelle Vaugier is a warm and charming presence as Elizabeth when she’s alive, in death she’s less an omnipresence in Robinson’s life than a charred walking corpse who shows up every so often to impel him to avenge her.

You may have noticed that I haven’t gone into any detail about the specific nature of Robinson’s payback; admittedly, trying to preserve any surprise about it is probably a futile gesture, given how widely read King’s story has been, and that the film’s trailer and even the DVD cover give it away. I guess it’s because the scenes that follow the springing of the trap are, by default, the movie’s most effective, in that you can’t help but feel some catharsis for Robinson—even as the lack of depth in what has come before rob them of some of their emotional impact.

There’s a reasonable amount of visual atmosphere, at least, and Gerald Packer’s brooding interiors and sun-blasted exteriors register nicely in anamorphic 1.78:1 widescreen on the discs. Their key supplement is a “Behind the Wheel of DOLAN’S CADILLAC” featurette, in which the narrator maintains that King’s tale is “very simplistic in its storytelling” and mispronounces the title of Edgar Allan Poe’s influential “The Cask of Amontillado,” while both Beesley and Packer make a case for the “existential” nature of their movie. There’s OK discussion here by the filmmakers and actors, plus glimpses of stunt scenes being set up and played out and detailed footage of some of the secondary makeup FX. Even more on-set video is offered in the “B-Roll Footage” section, but the most potentially fascinating element of DOLAN’S CADILLAC—its long road to the screen, and the many players involved along the way—receives only a brief mention in the making-of piece.

MOVIE: 💀💀💀💀

DVD PACKAGE: 💀💀💀💀

{jcomments on}