

## “I SPIT ON YOUR GRAVE” (Film Review)

Written by Michael Gingold  
Friday, 08 October 2010 12:59

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Remaking I SPIT ON YOUR GRAVE, the notorious 1978 rape-revenge flick (though it didn't achieve that notoriety till its title was changed from DAY OF THE WOMAN two years later) that got lumped in with the slasher trend by the genre's detractors would seem to be a fool's errand. The rep of Meir Zarchi's original rests not on its narrative ingenuity or craft, but on the graphic nature of its sexual violence; could an update made in these more cinematically conservative times have the same crude impact? And if not, what's the point?

The answer is that yes, the new version directed by Steven R. Monroe from a script by Stuart Morse (opening in limited release today) is just as raw and upsetting in its onscreen brutality as the original. Perhaps more so, since the acting is significantly better this time around, making the situations easier to emotionally identify with. And Monroe proves himself ready to take the big step beyond his previous Syfy likes of ICE TWISTERS and MONGOLIAN DEATH WORM; as opposed to the spare, middle-distance artlessness of Zarchi's camerawork, he takes a handheld but not too shaky approach that effectively places the audience right in the middle of the horrific goings-on.



The problem is...well, it's still I SPIT ON YOUR GRAVE. And perhaps not even the most talented creative team could overcome the inherent limitation of the material.

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Which is simply this: Its subgenre *is* its storyline, distilled down to its most banal basics. There's rape, there's revenge, and then the movie's over. It's basically 20 minutes of THE LAST HOUSE ON THE LEFT stretched out to 108 minutes. Which is one of its problems; there's absolutely no reason for the new SPIT to be this long. Yes, a new character (whose particulars I won't spoil) has been added to lend some easy ironies to the narrative package, but a simple, down-and-dirty exploitationer like this should have a good reason to go past the 90-minute mark, and I SPIT doesn't justify it.

This time around, Sarah Butler plays Jennifer Hills, the writer who escapes (so she thinks) the pressures of the city to stay at a cabin the woods and work on her latest novel. No sooner has she arrived in the rural countryside than she makes exploitation cinema's time-honored mistake of stopping for gas, which brings her into contact with the local louts. They don't cotton much to her citified attitude, and set out to teach her a lesson one night—a lesson that involves verbal and physical abuse, humiliation and repeated rape, with the inevitable modern wrinkle of the sleazebags recording their crimes on a camcorder. Their assaults leave her almost dead—but not quite, despite what they believe at first. After a few weeks or so go by, she comes back for blood.

The period between the rape and the revenge is actually the most enjoyable part of the film, as little clues and pieces of evidence turn up to suggest to the boys that Jennifer's still alive, and they get all paranoid and start turning on each other. While Jennifer isn't seen during these sequences, she's clearly hanging out on the sidelines, watching them squirm, and it's easy to share in the black amusement of the situation. And it's probably beside the point to ask how she survived and has been able to sustain herself all this time.

Then the payback starts, and it suggests that Jennifer has been spending some of that period hanging out with Jigsaw. Where Zarchi's avenging angel took a direct approach with knives, axes and the like (and lured her victims to their deaths with sexual come-ons, which may be the original film's most offensive conceit), the 2010 Jennifer subjects them to torturous death traps, delivering vicious one-liners to match. Rather than just bluntly dispatch them, Jennifer wants her tormentors to suffer. And they do suffer. And suffer. And suffer some more—to the point where one starts to wonder what the point is to a movie that is concerned with nothing *but* suffering.

By the time the second rapist is midway through his 10 minutes or so of writhing in pain, I SPIT ON YOUR GRAVE loses even the cathartic charge of seeing grotesque violence meted out against characters who deserve it. Because there's nothing else going on—no suspense, since

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we know the story requires that each of the miscreants is fated to die horribly, and no character-based tension, since we know there’s no possibility of rescue or redemption. The movie is, as Roger Ebert once wrote of the original, simply “a filmed record of perverted behavior.” A well-filmed and well-acted record, to be sure—to the point where both the rapes and the revenge are as excruciating to watch as intended. But, as I’ve written before, true horror is about the conflict between light and darkness—and the light goes out of I SPIT ON YOUR GRAVE by the end of the first reel.



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