Starting with DEAD OF NIGHT way back in 1945, British filmmakers have been at the forefront of the horror-anthology movement; heck, they saw the screen possibilities in America’s EC comics a couple of decades before we Yanks did. The country continues to push boundaries with LITTLE DEATHS, a triptych as graphically sexual in its terrors as we’ve ever seen in an omnibus feature—or any fright film, for that matter.

Eschewing a framing story, LITTLE DEATHS (which had its North American premiere last night at the SXSW festival) unites its three tales via the theme of aberrant sexuality, as expressed through the minds of a trio of up-and-coming filmmakers: THE HAUNTING OF #24’s Sean Hogan, Andrew Parkinson of I, ZOMBIE and DEAD CREATURES and Simon Rumley, who opened a lot of eyes with THE LIVING AND THE DEAD and RED WHITE & BLUE. The good news is that two out of three ain’t bad, and the better news is that they get stronger as they go along.

Hogan’s “House & Home” centers on a couple, Richard (Luke de Lacey) and Victoria (Siubhan Harrison), whose relationship at first seems dysfunctional in the bedroom department. As they make oblique references to their preferred activities, it becomes clear that they like to get up to no good, and that it will involve a homeless young couple we see shivering in the rain in a nearby park. They wind up inviting the girl, named Sorrow (Holly Lucas), over to their flat for a warm meal and a hot bath…and their guest’s name is a good signpost of the on-the-nose nature of the whole segment. From Richard and Victoria’s pathology to the story’s payoff, everything here is extremely familiar, and even the literal sprinkling of assorted bodily fluids through the action can’t distract from the overall predictability.

Bodily fluids are the crux of Parkinson’s “Mutant Tool,” the title of which at first seems to refer to

a device briefly seen in the collection of Dr. Reece (Brendan Gregory)—paging DEAD RINGERS. But it actually has a different, more euphemistic meaning that we soon discover as we follow Jen (Jodie Jameson), a former prostitute and recovering drug addict whose boyfriend/former pimp Frank (Daniel Brocklebank) is in cahoots with Dr. Reece, who prescribes Jen a new medication. He explains that any unpleasant side effects are nothing to worry about, though we know better…but what is Jen’s plight’s connection to the tortured person being kept chained up in a dingy lab and “harvested” in a way I’m not even going to begin to describe? Parkinson sustains the grisly mystery while generating sick laughs via the physical nature of that captive, and comes to a queasily effective climax.

Rumley’s “Bitch” is the most naturalistically told of the three tales, following in the stylistic tradition of his previous features, and that gives it the most powerful punch. Pete (Tom Sawyer) and Claire (Kate Braithwaite) are another couple with an unorthodox relationship, and from the moment Rumley reveals who the “bitch” is, you know all bets will be off when it comes to the deviance of the behavior and the explicitness of its presentation. You also know that the power games between Pete and Claire can’t go on too long without someone deciding they want to change things up, and when that happens, the outcome is shockingly cruel and devastatingly chilling—even more so because here, for the first time, Rumley holds back on showing the details.

LITTLE DEATHS’ visual scheme is grim throughout, though each vignette has a unique enough look to keep the film from seeming redundant. The overall mood is despairing and yet (in the latter two stories) compelling, with the filmmakers each expressing a distinctive take on the dark side of eroticism—although (SPOILER ALERT) the fact that they all end with the female lead being the ultimate victim might rub certain viewers the wrong way.

The lack of a connecting narrative device means that LITTLE DEATHS ends without an overall emotional payoff; common general theme notwithstanding, the experience is more akin to watching a short-film showcase than a full-fledged feature. Two-thirds of those shorts, however, are strong enough to make LITTLE DEATHS well worth a watch.

{jcomments on}