

“SAINT” (Film Review)

Written by Michael Gingold
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To clear up one key issue right off the bat: SAINT (a.k.a. SINT), the new movie from veteran Dutch writer/director Dick Maas, may be a holiday horror film, but it's not a Santa slasher flick. The villain is St. Nicholas of ancient European folklore, with an early line of dialogue distinguishing him from “Father Christmas” (a.k.a. the Americanized Santa Claus).

SINT, currently playing the [Tribeca Film Festival](#), also differs from most of its Santa-centric brethren in that it's not about someone dressing up as a Yuletide figure, but that figure himself, reimagined from his traditional benevolent persona to be a bringer of bad tidings. As Maas' mythology has it, in 1492 St. Nicholas bathed a town in grue. The villagers he has terrorized decide enough is enough and strike back at the bad bishop, but the look on his face as he goes down makes it clear Holland hasn't seen the last of him. Sure enough, he makes a reappearance in a second prologue set in 1968, where he and his evil minions (known as “Black Peters”) cause more bloody mischief before we arrive at the present day, specifically December 5, a.k.a. St. Nicholas' Eve. On that night, “Sinterklaas” is traditionally supposed to bring presents, but when it sees a full moon every 32 years (or 42 or 23, depending on the scene), he appears as a purveyor of evil to terrorize kids and adults alike.



The pair of lengthy opening setpieces introducing St. Nicholas (played by Maas regular Huub Stapel, in an almost wordless role performed mostly behind disfiguring makeup) are pretty great, veering from vivid big-scale mayhem in the first to spooky housebound horror in the second. St. Nick cuts a pretty imposing figure, mounted on horseback, clad in regal red robes with a towering same-colored headpiece, his attacks accompanied by Maas' unsubtle but effective score. Contributing his own music isn't the only way the writer/director echoes John Carpenter here; the villain's present-day arrival is heralded by a boatbound scene straight out of THE FOG, and once we've been introduced to the modern young protagonists, we follow three of the girls on a walk home from school, and one of them to a job babysitting a little boy who's fearful of a bad man he spots outside his window, and it's hard not to think about that original holiday-terror classic, HALLOWEEN.

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There’s even a Dr. Loomis character of sorts: Goert Hoekstra (Bert Luppés), a detective who’s got a very good reason to fear St. Nicholas, knows he’s coming but can’t convince any of the other cops of the danger. As the evil bishop and his Peters stab and slash their way through the snowy night, the focus shifts rather awkwardly from Lisa (Caro Lenssen), who at first seems like she’s being set up as SINT’s final girl, to Frank (Egbert Jan Weeber), one of her friends who finds himself in the wrong place at the wrong time and winds up on the run. Also thrown into the mix is a black-clad commando team led by Van Dijk (Ben Ramakers), a bald-headed brute whose imposing, grumbly-voiced persona steals every scene he’s in.

He and St. Nicholas are more interesting than the characters they menace; the youths (it’s hard to pinpoint their exact ages since their looks say college-age, while their behavior says high-school), Goert and their actions are largely drawn from the stock horror playbook. And while Frank’s ex-girlfriend Sophie (Escha Tanihatu) pays lip service to an anti-consumerist attitude, Maas doesn’t take full advantage of the story’s satirical possibilities. What makes SINT worthwhile is the “Sint” himself, brought to the screen by Maas with both atmosphere (including a great creepy shot in a hospital) and moments of thrilling kinetic movement. The visual FX of St. Nicholas on his steed galloping across the Amsterdam rooftops are quite striking, and one of these sequences culminates in a great, large-scale physical gag involving a police car.

There are plenty of gore FX too, and slasher fans will revel in the fact that SINT drenches the screen in a level of bloodshed not seen in many American fright films of an equivalent profile. (That’s not the only way Maas pushes boundaries for a mainstream project; many of St. Nicholas’ victims—albeit offscreen—are children, a potentially queasy angle that the writer/director just manages to get away with.) It’s a shame that Maas hasn’t invested the same level of invention into his nice characters that he has into his naughty ones, but SINT still kicks the sleigh bells off the likes of SILENT NIGHT, DEADLY NIGHT.



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