

“THE THEATRE BIZARRE” (Fantasia Film Review)

Written by Michael Gingold
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Since the 1970s, the guiding influence for most horror anthology films, directly or indirectly, has been EC Comics or THE TWILIGHT ZONE, with the stories-within-the-movie often serving as setups to a punchline either gory or ironic. The superior new omnibus feature THE THEATRE BIZARRE, which reaches back further to the Grand Guignol for inspiration, is a little different; while its tales certainly sock you with bloody whammies at the end, most of them are as much about the journey as the destination.

THE THEATRE BIZARRE, which just world-premiered at Montreal's [Fantasia festival](#) , brings together a collection of filmmakers known for applying the Grand Guignol touch to cinema, setting them loose to be as graphic and uncompromising as they wanna be. Within that approach, they adopt varying tones, and the episodes are well-organized within the framework of linking segments helmed by Jeremy Kasten, who revisits the dark, surreal stagecraft of his WIZARD OF GORE remake and gives Udo Kier a fun showcase as a living automaton introducing each venture into the strange and twisted. First up is Richard Stanley's THE MOTHER OF TOADS, a title that explicitly references Dario Argento even as the atmosphere feels more like Lucio Fulci (complete with THE BEYOND star Catriona MacColl in the title role) and the material derives from authors Clark Ashton Smith and H.P. Lovecraft. As vacationing occult know-it-all Martin (Shane Woodward) and his girlfriend Karina (Victoria Maurette) discover the dark side of the local magic practices, Stanley (who scripted with Emiliano Ranzani and Scarlett Amaris) turns the segment into a showcase for ominously gorgeous location photography (by Karim Hussain) of the French Pyrenees, MacColl's played-to-the-hilt comeback turn and one of the nastiest morning-afters ever (if you think coyote ugly is ugly...just wait).



From this exercise in lush supernaturalism, the tone and visuals turn colder and more personal in I LOVE YOU, whose nihilistic view of the human condition could only have come from COMBAT SHOCK writer/director Buddy Giovinazzo. André Hennicke (the serial killer from ANTIBODIES) stars as a man still desperately in love with his wife Mo (Suzan Anbeh) despite all evidence that the flame is long burned out on her side. The dialogue in which she viciously

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confirms all his suspicions becomes blackly comic in its bluntness, but the long, grisly final shot will smack any smile right off your face. More marital woes are explored in Tom Savini’s *WET DREAMS*, which may be the most Grand Guignol of all the stories in the way it unabashedly violates bodies, limbs and...certain organs (splatter courtesy of the Toetag Pictures gang). Savini also acts here as Dr. Maurey, psychiatrist of supremely troubled Donnie (James Gill), who’s unhappily married to Carla (Debbie Rochon, pictured below) and having an affair with the doc’s wife (Jodii Christianson). Unpleasant repercussions are clearly pending—and have already started showing up in Donnie’s nightmares. Savini and screenwriter John Esposito mess with the rules of reality with as much abandon as they inflict physical damage on their characters, and that enthusiasm is contagious.



From there, there’s nowhere to go but someplace quieter, and that’s just what Douglas Buck does with *THE ACCIDENT*. A meditation on death as witnessed by a little girl on a drive with her mom, this standout segment sheds its share of onscreen blood, but does so in the service of a contemplative and emotionally powerful scenario, with standout turns by Lena Kleine and Mélodie Simard as the mother and daughter. Equally transfixing but a lot harder to watch at certain moments is Hussain’s own *VISION STAINS*, which focuses on a young writer (Kaniehtiio Horn) on a mission to record the lives of women on the fringes of society who have given up on their own existences. The manner in which she acquires knowledge of her subjects/victims’ pasts involves makeup FX by C.J. Goldman that dare you not to look away, while Hussain and Horn’s characterization of their nameless antiheroine assures that you’ll want to stick with this one right to the end.

Following the psychological disturbance of that story, producer David Gregory’s comparatively lighthearted *SWEETS* provides an appropriate palate cleanser and curtain closer. Exploring similar territory to that of *I LOVE YOU* but a more satirical vein, it introduces us to Estelle (Lindsay Goranson) and Greg (Guilford Adams), a couple with a fetish for all things sugary whose relationship is on the rocks. Estelle has just the solution to their problem, involving a party hosted by Lynn Lowry, and what transpires before and during this bash is enough to put you off whatever theater snacks you might have left.

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The sheer variety of grotesqueries and perversities makes THE THEATRE BIZARRE truly worthy of its Grand Guignol inspirations, and will sate any horror fan seeking a gruesome good time. There’s something for every (bad) taste here, plus an abundance of noteworthy craft delivering the shocking sights and eerie sounds. The cinematography throughout is first-rate, with Hussain due special kudos for the distinctive imagery seen in TOADS, ACCIDENT and STAINS, and the scores all deliver the right sonic atmospheres; Simon Boswell makes a welcome comeback to the genre on TOADS and STAINS, though my personal favorite is Pierre Marchand’s quietly unsettling work on ACCIDENT.

The many different flavors and tones in THEATRE BIZARRE, courtesy of the many distinct talents who took part, means the movie ought to inspire lively debate among fans as to their favorites among the assorted stories. But regardless of your feelings about this or that individual episode, it’s guaranteed you’ll find enough to like to warrant enthusiastically recommending the movie overall.

