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Friday, 13 January 2012 11:23

DON’T GO IN THE WOODS is not a remake of the 1981 film of the same title—which is probably just as well, given that that movie occupies one of the lowest rungs on the slasher-flick ladder. Instead, the directorial debut of actor Vincent D’Onofrio harks back to a much sporadic trend: the horror musical.

This is not a gaudy rock fantasy like PHANTOM OF THE PARADISE or THE ROCKY HORROR PICTURE SHOW, though. Rather, DON’T GO IN THE WOODS (now on VOD and hitting select theaters today from Tribeca Film) follows a tradition mostly represented by fairly obscure chestnuts like 1940’s YOU’LL FIND OUT and 1967’s HILLBILLYS IN A HAUNTED HOUSE, in which singing groups become stranded in creepy dwellings and are menaced by evildoers in between song numbers. D’Onofrio’s movie, as the title suggests, is set in a forested patch of land in upstate New York (actually the filmmaker’s own property in Woodstock, appropriately enough), where a striving young rock band sets up camp to work on new material for a hoped-for hit album. Lead singer Nick Storm (Matt Sbeglia) has brought them here to get them away from the distractions of the city, forbidding them from bringing their girlfriends, throwing away their booze and drugs and smashing their cell phones with an ax—a plausible and amusing enough way for D’Onofrio to get around having to use the “I can’t get a signal!” cliché later.

As D’Onofrio and anyone who’s seen a movie of this type knows, it’s not a slasher film without some pretty female potential victims, and so the girlfriends, including Nick’s own squeeze Ashley (Cassandra Walker), show up anyway to join in the fun. But for a good portion of the running time, actually, DON’T GO IN THE WOODS is not a slasher film; other than an opening attack scene and a couple of hints of a menacing presence, it’s much more concerned with the band performing new tunes and dealing with relationship (both romantic and working) woes. The songs, written by Sam Bisbee (who also scripted the film with Joe Vinciguerra, though more than a bit of the dialogue appears improvised), aren’t bad, and the cast—actual NYC-area musicians with limited or no acting experience—are personable enough and occasionally pretty funny, though genre fans may become restless waiting for the blood to start shedding.

Once it eventually does, about an hour into this 83-minute film, there’s sufficient gore to please body-count fans as a mysterious killer starts hacking and bashing his way through the guys and gals. Devotees of classic slashers will also enjoy the mysterious killer’s garb, a black long coat and hat that seem intended to homage THE BURNING, another upstate-New York stalker film. There’s little backstory or motive provided for his murderous actions until very late in the game, where D’Onofrio reveals an affection for a killfest of more recent vintage (as he discussed—SPOILER ALERT—in the pages of Fango #300).

While D’Onofrio has a long acting résumé in major productions, DON’T GO IN THE WOODS is a determinedly off-Hollywood project that would suggest a roughness on the technical side, so it’s a nice surprise that it’s more polished than one might expect. Despite its small budget and brief shooting schedule, it has a lush look courtesy of cinematographer Michael J. Latino, whose nighttime images have a true, threatening after-dark quality, and sharp sound work that adds to the rustic atmosphere. There’s a hint of satire of the music business (Eric Bogosian turns up briefly as a label executive), but D’Onofrio doesn’t seem overly interested in satire, or drawing any parallels between that figuratively cutthroat industry and the literally cutthroat situation the protagonists find themselves in. DON’T GO IN THE WOODS is a movie of modest ambitions and modest pleasures, most recommended to patient slasher fans interested in seeing something a little different done with the form.