It’s not strictly a horror film, but it’s unlikely that any movie will come along this year to match the gut-wrenching intensity of the Australian indie THE HORSEMAN (hitting special-edition DVD and Blu-ray June 15 from Screen Media, and not to be confused for a second with last year’s Dennis Quaid-starrer HORSEMEN). It’s by now a cliché to describe a movie as reminiscent of ’70s cinema, but this stripped-down parental-revenge thriller truly warrants the description, and it also shows up the slick, absurd contrivances of an expensive modern schlocker like TAKEN.

While there’s more to the movie than its violence (more on that in a moment), the hand-to-hand brutality is certainly the most arresting element of this feature debut by writer/director/co-producer/editor Steven Kastrissios. Neither hyperstylized not gratuitously clinical, the dustups involving fists, kicks and assorted found objects are staged and shot by Kastrissios for maximum impact. He also has an unerring sense of when to use suggestion and (more often) when to put the damage in your face, but he doesn’t linger to the point where the damage itself becomes the point. He also has a story to tell, and he tells it compellingly well.

We’re introduced to pest control specialist Christian Forteski (Peter Marshall) as he metes out fiery justice to a skeevy human pest for reasons having something to do with his daughter and some videotapes. Kastrissios doesn’t hold out on the details for long; the teenager was recently found dead from a heroin overdose, and Christian has been tipped off that the drugged-up girl performed in a hardcore porn video just before she died. Now Christian is out for vengeance against any and all of those people involved with its production, and God help anyone he believes was in any way responsible for his daughter’s demise.

That said, it should be noted that despite his protagonist’s name, Kastrissios keeps any religious undertones/allegory to a minimum. Christian is not a stand-in or a symbol; he’s a specific individual who allows himself to be overtaken by an all-encompassing, singleminded quest for personal retribution. And it’s one that, a good deal of the time, the audience can heartily share. Christian’s targets are scum, by and large, and it’s easy to cheer him on as he maims, bashes and dispatches them. Yet as the movie (atmospherically shot in hi-def by Mark Broadbent) goes on, Kastrissios sets things up so that you can’t unquestionably condone all of his actions. Even if you feel the targets of his wrath deserve what they get, it’s still frightening to watch this formerly ordinary Joe become a homicide machine, and the transformation is riveting as portrayed by Marshall, whose plain features and thick body make him a perfect working-class antihero.

There are a couple of other key story elements that cast further doubt on whether Christian can truly cleanse his pain or will whether his actions will only create more anguish, but these shouldn’t be revealed or discussed in detail. Suffice it to say that not only does Christian risk losing the entirety of his soul by the time his journey comes to an end, but there may be other unintended casualties along the way. But these spiritual/philosophical musings only come to mind after THE HORSEMAN is over, and you’ve recovered from the thousand-pound punch it delivers to your emotional solar plexus.

See FANGORIA #294, on sale later this month, for a story on THE HORSEMAN.

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