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The Wizard of Gore - Unrated (2008, DVD)

Directors: Jeremy Kasten

Producers: Jeremy Kasten

Writers: Zach Chassler

Features: * Commentary * Outtakes * Deleted Material * Featurettes * Storyboards * Stills

Characters:

Kip Pardue ... Edmund Bigelow
Bijou Phillips ... Maggie
Crispin Glover ... Montag the Magnificent
Jeffrey Combs ... Geek
Joshua John Miller ... Jinky
Brad Dourif ... Dr. Chong

Genre: Horror

Review:

Wizard of Gore: Unrated DVD Review

 Most peoples introduction to Herschell Gordon Lewis original cult classic, "The Wizard of Gore" came from its quick glimpse and on-screen mention in the popular indie hit, "Juno." Ive always found the reference to be a bit out of place, particularly since high schoolers usually troll around Sam Raimis playground until college, having never seen or heard of Dario Argento, let along HG Lewis. Alas, that pop culture-riddled work of indie art serves at the grand introduction to the world of HG Lewis. And, in many ways, Jeremy Kastens offbeat remake serves as the delightful second helping.

The core story is still intact, with a delightfully campy magician named Montag (the deliciously zealous Crispin Glover) performing gory acts of disgusting murder before the eyes of his shocked, wayward patrons--who turn out to be hypnotized by an intoxicating drug. The story deviates with the characters and structure however, gleefully updating the tale to fit todays goth/alt culture.

Director Jeremy Kasten does a remarkable job crafting an almost fantastical, highly surreal world where goth culture rules the streets. Its a lavishly designed place, painted with vibrant neon lights, dazzling, elaborate sets and fantastically involved extras (thanks to the Suicide Girls who appear prominently in the film). There are massive alt-parties where women engage in blood wresting, people walk around in glitzy costumes and psychotropic drugs are peddled by luscious half-naked bar maids.

Kasten centers his film around an obsessed reporter named Edmund (an off-center Kip Pardue), who runs an underground alternative lifestyle publication that delivers the "gory" details, outlining the most shocking, violent shows. Edmund stumbles upon a show, "The Wizard of Gore" and quickly becomes obsessed with it. But when the on-stage victims turn up dead in reality, its up to Edmund

and his girlfriend Maggie (the subdued Bijou Phillips) to discover how, or if, this macabre magician is involved.

While the story does manage to set itself up nicely, the twists and turns that evolve over the course of the film's 90-minute running time are a bit too jarring and disconnected from the meat of this dark tale. By the film's end, it's hard to tell exactly what has taken place. Who is really behind the murders? What effect, if any, did the drug have on the people doused with it? It seems evident that Kasten was not eager to answer all of the film's confusing questions, but he also doesn't necessarily provide enough evidence for audiences to figure out his winding twists. The end result is a film that's only marginally good, marred by too much confusion and unwieldy angst.

Instead, it's quite apparent that Kasten should have focused his tale on the principle question: "Do you feel anything?"--a dark query asked by the great wizard himself. Unfortunately, Glover's magician Montag only briefly appears in a handful of scenes, leaving the rest of the film, much like the original HG Lewis film, in the hands of less appealing actors. Kip Pardue is fine as our lead, but he's never engaging or fully absorbed into his character. He's offset by too many colorful characters, making his film noir-type journalist the most boring element of this complex tale.

Still, Kasten is clever enough to weave a surprisingly tense tale. The film just keeps on building intensity throughout, mounting tension at every corner and off-setting it with goofy characters and vibrant scenes of brutal, but over-the-top violence. The cast plays perfectly into the mold and even though some performances are wobbly, the tension cuts through the cheapness of it all.

The gore of the picture is probably the biggest highlight. It's incredibly well done, only marred by a cheap "smoke and mirror" gag, a tactic used to hide cheap effects, that's employed in Montag the Magician's gory act. Even better is that Montag's victims are mostly Suicide Girls who fit into each of their scenes perfectly and provide some gratuitous nudity for rabid gorehounds and horny teens.

In many ways, this "Wizard of Gore" is closer in style and tone to what I'd imagine Juno herself would have actually loved. It's riddled with surreal, tense horror and gore and topped off with zany, over-the-top performances and pulp references of its own. Classy, it ain't, but fun--"The Wizard of Gore" has the market on that.

Film Report Card:
Entertainment Value: B+
Film Value: C

Overall Value:

DVD REVIEW:

Video:

Dimension presents "The Wizard of Gore" in 1.78:1 anamorphic widescreen and boy is it a disgusting transfer. Every single scene in the film is grainy and morose, clouded by a murky haze of dust. This is likely not the fault of the DVD itself, but the high-def medium used to shoot the film. Shooting HD in darkly lit environments never yields the best results, and almost the entire film takes place in dark, dank rooms--all at night. The DVD is clean of any other dust and debris, but lacks the sharpness and detail of big budget releases. For a straight-to-video release, this one's about average.

Audio:

Dimension delivers a mediocre Dolby Digital 5.1 mix. Surrounds are sparingly used with only occasional shocks stirring up any decent rear surround effects. The center channel is often overshadowed by intense front surround effects that taper dialogue. Also, not a whole lot of post-dubbing was put into this film and some of the location scenes are muddled and hard to hear. The film only delivers decently mixed rear surround effects towards the finale, but by then, it's too little, too

late. A disappointing mix.

Extras:

Dimension delivers a great assortment of goodies, but I wish the bonuses were split between two discs. Perhaps the transfer would have fared a little better.

Unrated Version -- Dimension delivers a gorier, more nudity filled 'Unrated' version that lives up to it's name. This version runs about a minute or so longer than the R-rated cut.

Commentary -- Featuring director/editor/producer Jeremy Kasten, writer Zach Chassler, producer Dan Griffiths, cinematographer/producer Christopher Duddy, and assistant editor/associate producer Maxx Gillman. If you enjoy the film, you'll love this commentary. It's obvious these guys love this film and the original cult classic. They offer their a lightweight interpretation of the material and the challenges of bringing a renowned horror classic to life once more.

Featurettes: Making-Of, Behind the Screen and From Volunteer to Victim -- Three great featurettes running just over an hour that detail the making of the film, the intense, gory effects and the casting the ever-popular Suicide Girls. Again, if you love this film, you'll delight in these awesome added goodies.

Deleted Material/Outtakes -- Were presented with a nearly 30 minutes of deleted scenes and some amusing outtakes for fans to enjoy. The material presented is pretty good, adding some depth to the feature. Well worth watching.

Storyboards and Photo Galleries -- You know the drill with these.

Final Thoughts:

Dark, surreal and oddly terrifying, "The Wizard of Gore" is a great re-imagining that's both intense and original, but a bit too confusing for its own good. The DVD is murky, but sports some fun featurettes and loads of deleted scenes. If you love this type of horror, you'll love this film.

DVD Report Card:

Video: B-

Audio: C

Extras: B+

Recommendation: Worth Renting.

On DVD August 19, 2008.

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----R. L. Shaffer