

HOMO HORRORS

HellBent and *Dante's Cove* offer a mixed bag of Halloween sweets

by Andy Mangels

It was a genre virtually untouched two decades ago, when a not-yet-out Clive Barker entered the horror scene with his unquestionably gay aesthetic in tomes like *The Damnation Game* and *Books of Blood* and movies like *Hellraiser* and *Nightbreed*. When Anne Rice cloaked her vampires in a shroud of pervasive bisexuality and flowery prose, the mainstreaming of gay horror wasn't even a concept in either the entertainment or activist worlds.

But as new generations have come up in the days of video and DVD and respected creators (like Barker) have come out, more and more gay has crept into the bloody annals of *grand guignol*. We have out filmmakers such as John Ottman (*Urban Legends: Final Cut*) and Victor Silva (the pair of *Jeepers Creepers* flicks), and almost every modern horror film has either a token gay character or shirtless male victims, often in bondage. Even mainstreamers like *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: The Beginning* and *The Covenant* can't seem to decide if they're aiming to offer male flesh as titillation or as a nonconsensually violent canvas. It wasn't that long ago that tits and ass were horror staples, but in the 21st century male abs and ass are just as likely to be proffered.

Which brings us to two recent releases on DVD: *HellBent* and *Dante's Cove*. Both are squarely targeted as gay horror projects, both feature copious queer sex, and at least one has lots of blood as well. But are they gruesomely good, or the

proverbial carrot in the Halloween candy bag?

HellBent features four gay men who embark on a trip to the West Hollywood Halloween Carnival, discovering sex, drugs, drag and loud music along the way. They also become the targets of a mysterious masked killer who has a terrific body and a penchant for beheading his victims and keeping their heads in bags. The killer—and the film—fit squarely in the Halloween-style slasher mold: Engaging in sex leads to death, the killer is a completely silent unstoppable cipher, the police are ineffective, and one spunky hero becomes particularly hard to kill despite the odds.

Old school is fine, but a bit retro and boring in this age of torture-horror films that are much more grisly and ass-clenchingly scary. There isn't a truly scary moment in the whole film—just random tension, some fun gore and lots of time to ponder exactly when which character will lose his head. The cast is attractive, but mostly of the cookie-cutter beautiful boy variety, and two subcultures are represented: leather (laughably) and drag (interestingly, showing the dilemma of trying to cruise while dressed as Marilyn). Extras are scant, but a making-of doc tells viewers two things they might not have otherwise known: The entire cast is straight, and two of the characters were supposed to be brothers (a fact I either missed or the screenwriter did).

Dante's Cove is the Here network's serialized supernatural soap opera set in a beach town with a witchy past. Unbeknownst to the twentysomethings living in a hotel, a man with dark powers is imprisoned in their wine cellar; his call is



Oily, sweaty overacting is the scariest thing about *Dante's Cove*.

only heard by newcomer Kevin, who has arrived to live with his new boyfriend, Toby. Kevin is shocked to find that everyone at the hotel is engaging in sex with everyone else—gay, straight, bi, lesbian—but he's more shocked when he frees the prisoner, who first forces him toward suicide, then dark dreams of submission.

The first season of *Dante's Cove* is available as a two-disc set, which is really just two films (one 84 minutes and one 106 minutes). The first film sets the story at a lugubrious pace that had me reaching for the fast-forward, especially during the sex scenes, which were about as

stimulating as an infomercial. In almost every scene—not just the sex scenes—the characters glistened with so much grease and “sweat” that I kept looking to see if an oil tanker had capsized on their beach. Bored to catatonia, I was prepared to give up after the first disc but, for the sake of this review, soldiered on.

The second disc is infinitely more interesting, really pumping up the supernatural elements and mystery, though Tracy Scoggins' vampy sorceress and her rejected warlock, Ambrosius (no, I'm not kidding), overact as if they're players at a renaissance dinner theater. *Dante's Cove* is trying very hard to be “*Dark Shadows* meets *Queer as Folk*,” and it nearly accomplishes that with the second film. There's no blood and no scares, but plenty of oily, sweaty booty and some campy creepiness. Oh, and according to the making-of doc, at least one actor is openly gay.

So there are your Halloween DVD choices: *HellBent*, an old-school slasher film with lots of blood and softcore sex, or *Dante's Cove*, an old-school pulp soap opera with lots of overacting and softcore oily sex. Here's hoping that future queer horror will continue to catch up to modern sensibilities as quickly as voiceless movie head-choppers do for their prey. **10**

ANDY MANGELS is a best-selling novelist and DVD documentary director. Visit his Web site at www.andymangels.com.



Blue Monkey Theater Company presents *Night of the Living Dead* through Oct. 28.

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DJs Trick + Treat (aka Portland artists Topher Sinkinson and Kristan Kennedy) spin an electro-indie-pop-crunk-splision remix of hardcore haunted house classics during “We Aren't DeeJays” night at gay-owned Saucebox. (9 pm. 214 SW Broadway.)

The drag punks of **Sissyboy** transform Doug Fir Lounge into a *Hell House of Terror!* Don't miss this shocking spectacular as Linah Cocaine's aborted fetus comes back for vengeance...and brains! Opening will be the haunting Garland Ray Project and Drunken Princess Girl. DJ Jimmie Jamma spins afterward. (10:30 pm. 830 E Burnside St. \$6.)

ONGOING ART EXHIBITS

Disjecta presents *Haunted*, a group show of contemporary installation art, through Oct. 29. (230 E Burnside St.)

Launch Pad Gallery presents *Into the Pumpkin Shell*, Jessica T. Hassler's paintings and drawings illustrating Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* as seen through the lens of Halloween and modern Goth culture, through Oct. 31. (534 SE Oak St.)

ONGOING THEATRICAL PRODUCTIONS

Blue Monkey Theater Company presents *Night of the Living Dead*, a live (almost) performance based on the cult classic film, through Oct. 28 at Valley Cinema Pub in Beaverton. (10 pm Oct. 20 and 21, 10 pm and midnight Oct. 27 and 28. 9360 SW Beaverton-Hillsdale Highway. \$12 from 503-777-4506.)

Northwest Children's Theater presents *The Witches*, Roald Dahl's theatrical brew about a young orphan and his kindly grandmother who find themselves smack in the middle of a witches convention, through Oct. 29 at Northwest Neighborhood Cultural Center. (7 pm Friday and Saturday, 2 pm Saturday and Sunday. 1819 NW Everett St. \$16-\$20 from 503-222-4480.)

Portland Art Center presents *The Catacombs Project*, an interactive performance-based installation exploring the dreams of Portland grounded in historical material from the city's Old Town and North End, through Oct. 31. (Call for times. 32 NW Fifth Ave. \$10-\$20 sliding scale.)

The Tragedies present *Theatre du Grand Guignol*, the original French theater of horror and comedy, through Oct. 28 at The Little Church. (8 pm Thursday-Saturday. 5138 NE 23rd Ave. \$15-\$20 from 503-367-2100.)



A mysterious masked killer targets four gay men at the West Hollywood Halloween Carnival in *HellBent*.

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