

## Film Reviews

### Pen Densham's The Kiss

In a brightly lit swimming pool at night, two women are struggling. From one of their mouths protrudes a foot-long, thick slimy creature. It thrusts itself into the younger woman's mouth. Just then, her father jumps into view screaming "No!", and yanks the beast from out of both of their mouths. The thing in his right hand turns to face him and snickers...

This scene is the climax of *The Kiss*, a Canadian horror film released late last year. The opening scene and others of a similar calibre of weirdness provide a few moments of interest in what is an otherwise cautiously constructed genre piece. Every conflict, every gag, every scare is telegraphed years in advance to prime the viewer for the appropriate reaction.

To fans of the horror genre, *The Kiss's* climax may recall David Cronenberg's parasites in *Shivers*. However, the origin and function of the all-important monster differs significantly in this film. Whereas Cronenberg's monsters were products of science and repressed sexual energy, the creature in *The Kiss* belongs safely in the realm of magic and witchcraft. In terms of its meaning, this monster therefore lacks potential for the social criticism that the beasts in Cronenberg's earlier films have, arguably, suggested. In accordance with his decision to go with a more familiar formula, director Pen Densham has created a film that, despite its flirtation with strangeness, lands firmly on the side of the traditional nuclear family.

The story involves two sisters, separated at a tender age, who don't quite meet again because one of them is creamed by a pick-up truck on her way to meet the other. With Hillary the Good (Pamela Collyer) out of the way, evil sister Felice (Joanna Pacula) ingratiates herself into the lives of the bereaved young husband and nymphet daughter. They don't know that their mysterious relative draws witchcraft power from a parasitic beast inside her body that sends her into ceremonial trances, and leaves a nasty rash. The beast inhabits the carrier until it is time to move on to a younger female member of the family. Amy, the daughter, (Meredith Salenger) is targeted to become the new host, and Felice uses witchcraft ceremonies to murder all who come between her and the girl. At the end of the film, it looks very much like young Amy is going to get the beastly Kiss; however, Dad (Nicholas Kilbertus) and neighbour intervene just in time and blow Felice to the other place.

The premise of this film, as in others of the genre, is wholly contingent upon everyone's disbelief in the young heroine's instinctual recognition of her foe. In *The Kiss*, this conflict is aggravated by the fact that the girl's father starts sleeping with the witchwoman. The adults can then with good reason mistakenly suppose that psychological factors like grief and jealousy are



Aunt Felice (Joanna Pacula) looks fondly on her niece Amy (Meredith Salenger).

responsible for Amy's conviction in her aunt's evil nature. This pseudo-scientific explanation of the supernatural typically and necessarily delays the adults from reacting to the threat until the last possible moment. Meanwhile, on another level, the film insinuates a psycho-sexual connection between the girl and the father that is not only quite risqué but unexpectedly blatant.

To begin with, the various scenes depicting the supposedly virginal Amy in her Tampax-white swimsuit, announce her physical maturity. In one sequence, she flirts and poses "Sports Illustrated" style poolside and in the company of her father. But it is montage that provides the strongest implication and condemnation of an incestuous relationship. One sequence employs crosscutting to link Amy in class and Dad and Felice consoling each other at home. As the couple begin to make love, back at school (and to her surprise,) Amy flushes with sympathetic hot-and-heaviness. Cuts between the two locations establish a postural echo between Amy and Felice that strongly suggests a shared sexual experience with the father, except for the fact that Amy experiences the feeling as profound discomfort. She cries out and runs from the room as Felice is shown reaching orgasm back home. The camera even lingers on Amy's vacant chair to reveal a trickle of blood. This defloration via sympathetic magic is never explained or pursued in the film. One wonders what, if anything, the typical 14-year-old horror-goer made of it. Similarly, in a scene in which Felice deters dad from saving Amy by seducing him into crippling sex, the inference that Amy is participating in forbidden sex with both Dad and Aunt is openly suggested. Amy awakens in distress to hear her father's sex-throes, which are indistinguishable on the soundtrack from sounds of suffering.

The lesbian overtones to the threat that Felice poses are also somewhat unusual in such a mainstream film. She is physically aggressive with Amy, who dislikes her from the first because "she's always trying to touch me." The image of Felice going in for "The Kiss" evokes the figure of the lesbian vampire, who rarely gets much screen time in American horror films. But there is yet another twist that may be present in order to allay any discomfort caused by the lesbian overtones. Out of the mouth of the lesbian vampire snakes the fabled phallic beastie! The vampire is, after all, just the host (the original title for the film) for a preying male evil that forcibly inhabits and is passed on between women!

All the layers of taboo-flirtation and liberally sprinkled sexual symbolism raise questions that are potentially interesting, but that the film does not pursue. In the end, they simply cloud your understanding of the nature of the beast. The only unequivocal statement of the filmmakers' intent lies in the articulation of the character Brenda, who pulls Amy from the pool, and it is she who bestows the "real" Kiss - on the forehead mind you. The film also implies that Brenda will go on to become the new mother and complete the otherwise endangered family.

For all its attempts at a semi-serious sexual discourse, *The Kiss* is plodding on the whole and ultimately a generic facsimile of American horror flicks, making it generally less amusing to watch than to talk about later. Given that the production values are quite high, the filmmakers must have been stunned by the film's brief run in the theatres, proving that even following what seems to be a recipe for success in a currently mega-popular genre is no guarantee in the fickle mainstream. Unfortunately for the filmmakers and for us, the feature's poor box office showing

may be the most Canadian thing about it.  
Anne Ilkow •

**THE KISS** exec. p. Richard B. Lewis p. Pen Densham, John Watson d. Pen Densham sc. Stephen Volk, Tom Ropelewski ed. Stan Cole makeup/creat. fx. Chris Walas, Inc. cast. Pennie Dupont mus. J. Peter Robinson p. des. Roy Forge Smith d. o. p. Francois Protat Cdn cast. Elite Prods. Rosa Bucci p. mgr. Wendy Green 1st a. d. Henry Bronchtein 2nd a. d. Pierre Houle cost. des. Renee April 3rd. a. d. Ricky Friedman p. coord. Lynn Mallay unit/loc. mgr. Michel Chauvin asst. unit mgr. Richard Marsan sc. sup. Marie Theberge, Suzanne Chiasson asst. to p. mgr. Elisabeth-Ann Kimber asst. to Mr. Densham Mary Alice Holmes assts. to prof. Cynthia Glasser, Mark Stern sc. Leslie Grierson p. a.'s Gilles Perrault, Jean Yves Dolbec, Marc Beaulieu, Marianne Szabo, Marc Larose, Sylvain Auclair, Pierre Paquette, Pierre Lapointe cam. op. Bert Tougas 1st. asst. cam. Luc Lussier 2nd asst. cam. Eric Moynier adiant. photog. Mark Champion cam. trainee Pierre Jodoin addn. cam. op. Serge Ladouceur, George Archambault underwater cam. op. George Archambault underwater cam. asst. Jean-Francois Bourassa Steadicam op. Julian Chojnacki steadicam 1st. asst. Jean Marc Casavant still photo Attila Dory, Jonathan Wenk loc. scout Lorne Goloff sp. fx. sup. Louis Craig sp. fx. tec. Antonio Vidosa, Pierre Rivard, Jacques Langlois sd. ed. Peter Thillaye, Mike O'Farrell, Alan Geldart asst. sd. ed. Bruna Degazio, Alison Fischer, Thor Henrikson dial. ed. Alison Grace, Neil Grieve mus. ed. Peter Riley, Jon Elizalde Foley artist Andy Malcolm ADR rec. Penny Hozy re-rec. mix. Austin Grimaldi, Dina Pigat, Keith Elliott Foley rec. Jack Heeren orch. Brad Ellis loc. sd. Don Cohen boom op. Eric Zimmer sd. trainees Charles Zed, David Cole 1st. asst. ed. Mark Lemmon, Peter Riley 2nd asst. ed. Matthew Ennis art d. Suzanna Smith props Jan Kazermirchuk gaffer Gilles Mayer best boy Jacques Gauthier key grip Johnny Dauost best boy grip Robert Auclair grips Jan Mark Lapointe, Daniel Prevost, Michel St. Pierre gen. op. Yves Paquette, Yves Ouimet 2nd unit: d. Steven Davison 1st. a. d. Francois Leclerc 2nd a. d. Carole Dubuc, Pierre Paquette unit/loc. mgr. Michel Guay d. o. p. Jean Charles Tremblay l. p. Joanna Pacula, Meredith Salenger, Mimi Kuzyk, Nicholas Kilbertus, Jan Rubes, Pamela Collyer, Peter Dvorsky, Celine Lomez, Sabrina Boudot, Shawn Levy, Joe Dorian Clark, Richard Dumont, Priscilla Mouzakioni, Talya Ruben, Phillip Pretten, Johanne Harelle, Tyrone Benskin, Shannon McDonough, Vlasta Vrana. A Tri-Star/Astral Film Enterprises release.