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BOOTY & THE BEAST

By JAN DOENSE

German horror
makes a comeback
with a stylistically
ambitious slasher
being
released
by Fango
Video.

SCHOOL'S Cutting the Class

Just when you thought it was safe to go back to school without being chased by a masked killer, Fangoria Home Video this month releases *School's Out*, a stylish psychochiller from Germany produced on a mere \$1.3-million budget. *School's Out* tells the story of Nina (Katharina Wackernagel) and some of her friends who spend a rainy night at their former high school preparing some pranks for their teachers. Sure enough, a serial killer has just escaped from a nearby asylum, and soon Nina's friends fall victim to the masked, scissor-wielding assassin dressed as a harlequin. It may sound boringly familiar, but *School's Out* is a taut little Euroslasher best described as a cross between *Scream* and colorful Italian *gialli* like Mario Bava's *Blood and Black Lace*, Dario Argento's *Deep Red* and Michele Soavi's *Stagefright*.

Of course, *School's Out*'s original title, *Schrei—Denn Ich Werde Dich Töten*

(*Scream—For I Will Kill You*), leaves little question of its primary source of inspira-

"There is no other subgenre in horror that has more in common with traditional legends than the slasher movie."

—Kai Meyer, screenwriter

tion, as director Robert Sigl and writer Kai Meyer readily admit. "The worldwide success of *Scream* played a key role in the

genesis of *School's Out*," Sigl says. "We were lucky enough that Kai knew this producer, Jan Kromschroeder, who became head of the TV movie department at the German commercial network RTL. He wanted to do a genre project and approached Kai to write it."

"Actually, he wanted to option my novel *Hex*," adds Meyer. "But since that had already been optioned, we decided to work on a new concept. I had wanted to write an original screenplay for a horror film ever since I was a teenager. I had several ideas, but I was pretty sure they wouldn't like any of them because German networks are all about recycling hit concepts from the U.S. But then *Scream* was released in Germany and became a huge success, and I told them, 'Look, here's this horror movie that everybody wants to see. How about doing something in the same vein but giving it a more European spin?' Even then, it took some time to convince them, but finally RTL,

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Europe's biggest TV network, green-lighted the project.

"As far as my film education is concerned," Meyer continues, "I'm very much a product of the '80s, and like a lot of people my age, I have seen every single slasher and splatter movie that came out between the mid-'70s and the late '80s. So the idea of writing a teen slasher set against the background of a high school graduation party had strong appeal to me."

When it came to choosing a director for *School's Out*, Meyer was excited to learn that Sigl was interested. "Robert became the director after the third draft of the script was written," Meyer recalls. "I loved his movie *Laurin*, which he did back in the '80s. I had actually thought about contacting him a while before *School's Out*, because *Laurin* and most of my novels have a lot in common in terms of Gothic atmosphere, and there aren't many professionals working in Germany in the horror genre. But somehow it had never happened, so when he came on board I was delighted."

For the 37-year-old Sigl, working in the horror genre is a childhood dream come true. "When I was a kid, I sneaked into theaters to see Polanski's *The Fearless Vampire Killers* and *Rosemary's Baby*, and I instantly knew I wanted to become a director," he says. "I have been obsessed ever since with their magical imagery. I am not interested in mere shocks; I'd like the audience to care about my characters. Most slashers or *gialli* are all about inventing the most bizarre and gruesome deaths instead of creating an emotional atmosphere, which is essential for creating real suspense. Why should anyone care for hysterical, wisecracking, unlikable characters being sliced and diced? So I always try to put personal

childhood fears into my films to create a contrasting atmosphere of eeriness and strange familiarity. Hopefully, when seeing my films, audiences will recollect their own childhood memories."

Sigl studied film at the Hochschule für Fernsehen und Film in Munich, and at age 25 realized his first theatrical feature *Laurin*, which won the 1988 Bavarian Film Award for Best Direction by a Newcomer. *Laurin* is a fairy tale-like horror film set in 1900, centering around a little girl with psychic powers who unmasks the local schoolteacher as a child murderer. Next,

Sigl directed the ambitious 250-minute sci-fi miniseries *Stella Stellaris*, followed by a TV movie for Showtime, *Lexx 1.4: The Giga Shadow*, starring Malcolm McDowell. "That was a great experience," says Sigl. "It was my first international film with a big name attached to it." Sigl will return to the States for a big-screen adaptation of Dan Simmons' novel *Children of the Night*. This will be an international co-production with some well-known American actors attached, but at this point Sigl is reluctant to reveal any names.

For his part, 30-year-old Meyer had his first encounter with the fright film business when he got a surprise call from Hollywood. "I was in college at the time," he remembers. "I had sold several articles about horror film directors to German film magazines and, unsuccessfully, tried my hand at screenwriting. Suddenly one evening, my phone rang. On the other

Philip (Niels Bruno Schmidt) finds out the hard way not to laugh at the Harlequin.

end was Jackie Kong, the director of *Blood Diner*, whom I had never met or spoken to before. She told me a German friend of hers had recommended me to write a horror movie she wanted to shoot in Rome. I went crazy! I mean, I was this 19-year-old guy living in Germany, and got this offer without ever having even finished a screenplay before! I wrote the script, got a few bucks—and then the movie never happened. But for a guy my age, it was all very exciting."

Four years later, Meyer had his first novel published at the ripe old age of 23. By now, he has had 27 books printed, and while he has written several horror novels for young adults as part of a series he originated in 1998, the majority of his

It's the test of her life for Jessica (Sandra Leonhard).

Photos: Copyright RTL



"Most slashers are all about inventing the most bizarre and gruesome deaths instead of creating an emotional atmosphere."

—Robert Sigl, director

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work is dark fantasy or horror for adults, mostly with historical backgrounds. Four of them, including *Hex*, are currently in development as feature films.

While horror cinema's roots lie in such silent German classics as *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, *Nosferatu* and *The Golem*, and with German filmmakers like Karl Freund who created the Expressionistic look of some of the best Hollywood chillers of the '30s and '40s, the great tradition of German horror is sadly long gone, as Meyer points out.

"The last serious German horror movie before *School's Out* was Werner Herzog's *Nosferatu* back in the '70s," he says. "Between then and *School's Out*, there were no real horror movies in Germany, except Jörg Buttgerit's films like *Nekromantik* and *Schramm*—but they were not really professional productions, whatever one might think of them. Shortly after *School's Out* came *Anatomie*, which has its faults but was a huge success nonetheless. And there was another teen slasher with Elke Sommer, *Flashback*, which was a big flop."

Meyer likes to refer to *School's Out* as a "teen giallo," combining elements from Italian horror movies and American slashers. But Sigl again refers to Polanski rather than Soavi or Argento as a key stylistic influence. "The claustrophobic atmosphere of the school building and its corridors stems more from films like *The Tenant* and *Repulsion* than *Stagefright*," he notes. "Also, I was impressed by the eerie appearance of the dwarf in Nicolas Roeg's *Don't Look Now*, so I tried to convey a similar feeling with the harlequin. In general, we tried to make *School's Out* different from other slasher films by choosing a kind of magical location for the old school building and creating an almost fairy tale-like world inside of it. I wanted the building to secretly be the protagonist: The institution that is sup-

posed to impart knowledge and values to the pupils and protect them becomes a place of evil and mortal danger."

Meyer goes even further in pointing out the differences between *School's Out* and your average slasher flick. "What makes it different is something that happens mostly in the background of the whole storytelling process. *School's Out* is probably the first slasher movie modeled after mythologist Joseph Campbell's theories about the Hero's Journey. The whole structure follows Campbell's discoveries about the similarities between myths from around the globe, which he wrote down in his book *Hero With a Thousand Faces*. Believe it or not, there is no other subgenre in horror that has more in common with traditional fairy tales and legends than the slasher movie. The dangers our heroes encounter, the nature of the beast they must overcome, the road they have to take to survive—all this is basic, mythic storytelling.

"That part of the project interested me the most," Meyer continues, "and I was very careful not to tell anybody but Robert about it, because I knew the producers would smell 'art-house movie' right away. But of course it's not an art-house movie—it's entertainment! We made sure the mythical and fairy-tale elements were not only present in the overall plot, but in little things: the girl in the red cape who gets lost in the wood; the room full of stuffed wild animals, which became our version of the haunted forest; the room with the maps which form a labyrinth with the killer lurking somewhere inside. And then of course there is the spiral staircase, very much a symbol for the hero's journey into the underworld. Before every murder, the victim has to climb down the stairs, to enter the underworld. But when Nina finally realizes she has to confront the killer, she has to walk up the stairs, to

leave the underworld and enter reality again. Those things became very important to me, and Robert added a lot to it."

Even the villain's garb fits into Meyer's classic approach to *School's Out's* screenplay. "I chose the harlequin costume for the killer because, again, I wanted something with a certain cultural resonance. When the character of the harlequin was invented for the Comedia Dell'Arte several centuries ago, he was the figure who guided the souls of the dead to hell. Not many people know this any more; all we see in a harlequin today is the funny or maybe melancholic clown. But originally he was something totally different, and this might sit somewhere in our unconscious—deep down, we know what he was. And that's why we fear him, especially in this movie."

Since *School's Out* was made for television, it was shot on 16mm rather than 35mm, which Sigl reveals had its advantages. "Shooting on 16mm enabled us to do much higher coverage of the scenes within our 25 shooting days than we would have been capable of with 35mm," he says. "As far as doing this film for TV, I was lucky that RTL liked the result so much that they financed two versions: a censored TV edition and the uncensored director's cut. You know that one of the big hobbies of the German film and TV industry is censorship. So even the less violent version shown on TV caused a big scandal. This will sound absurd, but one reason we had problems with the German censor on *School's Out* was that I created too much sympathy for the victims!"

Meyer adds, "The version shown on German television was two minutes shorter than the one the U.S. audience is going to see—and it still generated a huge scandal when a teenage boy killed his teacher on the very day it was broadcast. Nobody seemed to be interested in the fact that the murder happened in the

It used to be that the sharpest thing around final exam time was a #2 pencil. (Katharina Wackernagel as Nina)





Just as in *Scream*, the killer first bumps off a familiar pop-culture personality (German VJ Enie van de Maiklockjes).

morning while the movie was shown in the evening, 10 hours later." Needless to say, German television doesn't often broadcast films as violent as *School's Out*, which boasts some gruesome makeup FX by Christina Paul. "And after the scandal we caused, it's quite likely they won't try again in the near future. The sequel, which we just shot, is actually disguised as a ghost story. Less blood, but even more Gothic atmosphere!"

The critical response was not much better. "Most critics tried to ditch it because they hated the violence," says Sigl. "Plus, they're only willing to accept horror films from foreign countries. They treat their own like bastards that didn't deserve to be born. But the audience liked it a lot and it got very high ratings; it was one of the highest-rated TV movies of 1999."

With TV censorship being so severe in Germany, a theatrical release would seem to have made more sense, but Sigl explains, "RTL wanted to keep the TV rights. Thus it became too much of a financial risk for the distributors that were interested in releasing it theatrically, because they would have had to invest something like \$2 million to do it properly."

Much of the credit for the stylish look of *School's Out* must go to director of photography Sven Kirsten, who has a way with colors and camera angles reminiscent of the legendary Mario Bava. "Sven is German but lives and works in California most of the time," says Sigl. "He has done *Mistress* with Robert De Niro and *Doppelgänger* with Drew Barrymore, among others. But he also works in Germany sometimes, mostly for RTL. That's

why he was chosen to do *School's Out*."

Although unknown to U.S. audiences, *School's Out*'s cast includes some names that are well-known in Germany. "Katha-

Rose." Adds Meyer: "Most of the other actors in *School's Out* have had quite a lot of experience in German films and TV, the only exception being Enie van de Maiklockjes. She's the redhead who plays the first victim and is one of the most popular VJs on German television."

School's Out's success led to the production this year of the sequel, titled *School's Out 2: Island of Fear*, which reteamed Sigl, Meyer and Kirsten. And next month, Fangoria Home Video will release an English-dubbed version of *School's Out* on DVD and VHS, which is especially good news to Meyer. "I have been a Fango reader since age 15," he reveals. "so I know about their love and care for the genre. I'm sure *School's Out* will reach exactly the audience it was made for."

Speaking of Fango, Meyer remembers one particular moment during the filming of *School's Out* when he wasn't too happy to lay eyes on his favorite magazine. "When we were shooting the prologue, the scene with the girl and the hooded killer in the car, the assistant director turned up waving the newest issue of Fango. He

opened it and showed me a photograph from *Urban Legend*, of a girl and a hooded killer in a car! At that point, right in the middle of shooting our scene, we couldn't change anything. So until I saw *Urban Legend* a few months later, I feared we would have exactly the same beginning! As it turned out, the scenes are totally different. But on that evening in the woods, freezing and soaked from the artificial rain, it was the last thing I needed to see!"



The friendship of Anne (Marlene Meyer-Dunker) and Nina may not last forever—or even an hour.

rina Wackernagel, who plays Nina, is one of the biggest talents among young German actors and had won an important TV award prior to *School's Out*," reveals Sigl. "She starred in a popular TV series which is a bit similar to *Dawson's Creek*, and has a huge following over here, comparable to Neve Campbell or Jennifer Love Hewitt in the U.S. And Michael Habeck, who plays Nina's uncle, the police officer, is best known for his role as a bald albino monk in *The Name of the*

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