

MOTTO OF A HORROR FILM-MAKER

Article by Michael McWilliams, News Special Writer 'Detroit News'

It probably will never be advertised alongside the glossy, big-budget horror movies of our time, but you won't easily forget a locally produced little film called 'Within the Woods'.

In just 32 minutes, it provides more chills, thrills and squeamish giggles than such recent duds as 'Prophecy' and 'The Amityville Horror' combined.

'Within the Woods', which will be shown tomorrow [refers to sometime during spring 1979] at the Punch and Judy Theatre as a curtainraiser for 'The Rocky Horror Picture Show', is a gruelingly effective shocker that displays the audacity and talent of three former Michigan State University students - Sam Raimi, Robert Tapert and Bruce Campbell. It was photographed in 8-millimeter color film on a farm near Marschall, Mich., bankrolled by a collective pool of \$1,600 and wrapped up in six days of shooting.

'I like it when (the audience) screams,' says Raimi, a bright 19-year-old who acted as writer-director for the effort, 'When they jump, it's a surface reaction - a cheap thrill - but I like the fact that they jump.'

Raimi has been making short films since he was 13 - 23 of them with Campbell, a former classmate at Groves High School in Birmingham, and seven with Tapert, who joined last year at MSU. The young producers call their film company Renaissance Pictures Ltd.

Raimi's method, he confides with a sly smile, depends simply on audience manipulation: 'I like to know a secret that they don't know,' he says, nearly disappearing into a sofa at Franklin Street East restaurant. 'They don't know it's coming, but I do.'

Adds Campbell, who played on of the leads in 'Within the Woods': 'You let them think that they know a fake scare, and then you hit them with your own secret - a one-two punch.'

Chock-full of scary secrets, 'Within the Woods' concerns two couples who encounter a deadly force from a forest while vacationing at a farmhouse. One couple (Campbell and Ellen Sandweiss) go picnicking in the woods while the other couple (Scott Spiegel and Mary Valenti) remain home to play Monopoly. On their excursion, campbell and Sandweiss stumble across an Indian burial ground where Campbell unearths a cross, a broken bowl and a hunting knife from a shallow grave. He assures his partner that he has not aroused the anger of the Indian spirits. But he's wrong - dead wrong.

Murdered and mutilated by the spirit whose grave he violated, Campbell comes back to life as his killer's avenging angel - a resurrected zombie assassin. In a series of marvelously effective, comically graphic set pieces, Campbell stages a fight to the finish with his former friends at the farmhouse.

There is such compression of gory detail in 'Woods' that it sometimes looks to the audience like a trailer for a Roger Corman epic on Charles Manson. 'I wanted to hurt them; I wanted to damage their psyches,' Raimi explains with such amused intensity that his face is caught between a frown and a grin.

But there is a limit to how far Raimi will go to challenge his audience and his own emotions. When comparing 'Woods' to 'the Hills Have Eyes', an especially 'damaging' horror film about flesh eating savages, for instance, Raimi, Campbell and Tapert become animated, merry and thoroughly revulsed. 'I had stomach cramps walking out of that one,' says Raimi, 'I don't want to hurt them that bad.'

Raimi's awareness of previous shockers has enriched his own work in 'Within the Woods.' He has looked at 'Night of the Living Dead' and knows our terror of the grave. He has looked at 'Carrie' and knows the effect of a bloody arm out of the blue. He has looked at 'Taxi Driver' and knows the sometimes psychotic rites of 'manhood.' He has looked at 'The Texas Chainsaw Massacre' and knows our primal fascination with blood.

With all this background, however, Raimi still has his failings. Above all, he's going to have to limit his point-of-view shots. In the forest sequence, for example, we see things from five separate points-of-view - and in one irritating shot, the picnic basket is thrown over the camera lens.

'I realize now that I could have done this and this and this differently,' Raimi concedes. 'It tortures me. But this is part of the purpose of making (a movie). I think each successive film, you learn a lot.'

Raimi displays a wealth of learning in 'Within the Woods.' Perhaps he will be able to make a more extended work, a feature film, in which he can clear up some of his technical deficiencies and prove that he has the personal depth to provide a context - a thematic meaning - for all his gore. Like many budding artists, Raimi is particularly skittish on this point of 'meaning.' He considers it 'silly' to take too seriously what comes to him naturally.

When loosened up by a few jokes, however, Raimi can discuss underlying ideas in his work with considerable wit. For him, there are three recurrent themes: 'One, the innocent must suffer. Two, the guilty must be punished. And three, you must drink blood to be a man.'

If that doesn't reveal a seriously funny mind at work, I don't know what does.