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CAST

TRISH EVERLY as Julia Sullivan
MICHAEL MACRAE as Sam Edwards
DENNIS ROBERTSON as Father James
MORGAN HART as Helen
ALLISON BIGGERS as Mary Sullivan
EDITH IVEY as Amanda Beauregard
RICHARD BAKER as Sacha
JERRY FUJIKAWA as Mr. Kimura

CREW

Produced and Directed by **OVIDIO G. ASSONITIS**
Produced by **PETER SHEPHERD**
Screenplay by **OVIDIO G. ASSONITIS, STEPHEN BLAKELY,**
ROBERTO GANDUS and **PETER SHEPHERD**
Director of Photography **ROBERTO D'ETTORRE PIAZZOLI**
Edited by **ANGELO CURI**
Music composed by **RIZ ORTOLANI**





THE OCCULT, OCTOPI AND OVIDIO NASTIES – THE AMAZING EXPLOITATION CAREER OF OVIDIO G. ASSONITIS

by John Martin

The late lamented Italian B-movie tradition, as Kim Newman sagely put it, turned on and turned out “surprisingly sophisticated mixes of imitation, pastiche, parody, deconstruction, reinterpretation and operatic inflation” of existing (usually American) cinema hits. From the 1950s through to the mid-80s (when the deregulation of Italian media made the fortune of one Silvio Berlusconi and simultaneously killed off the Italian ‘B’s), sword and sandal heroics, Spaghetti Western cynics, super spies, black-gloved *giallo* killers, “shoot first and ask questions later” tough guy cops, cannibals and equally hungry zombies, post-apocalyptic swashbucklers et al. succeeded each other across Italian then international screens and, ultimately, onto the shelves of video stores in every far-flung corner of the globe, all strictly in accordance with current perceptions of what was “hot” at the box office. Servicing this tradition of imitation, pastiche, etc. was a cohort of genre-jumping journeymen who were little heralded in Italy (then or now) but proved inspirational to later big-deal directors like John Carpenter, Quentin Tarantino (who has evangelised tirelessly on their behalf) and, more recently, Nicolas Winding Refn. Names such as Mario Bava, Riccardo Freda, Dario Argento, Lucio Fulci, Sergio Martino and Antonio Margheriti are now widely known, if not universally respected. Countless collaborators who kept the Roman exploitation mills grinding are less celebrated, even those of them who managed the occasional international hit of their own. Such a trouper is Ovidio G. Assonitis...

Of Greek extraction, Assonitis was born (like Freda before him) in Alexandria, Egypt on 18 January 1943. A certified citizen of the world, he spent much of the mid-60s to mid-70s distributing something like a thousand films in Far Eastern markets, from offices in Thailand, Hong Kong, Singapore, the Philippines and Indonesia, often in conjunction with American International Pictures. Also during this period he began dabbling in production with the likes of Alfonso Brescia’s poverty row mondo shockumentary *The Labyrinth of Sex* in 1969, followed by more prestigious efforts such as *Man From Deep River* (aka *Deep River Savages*), the Umberto Lenzi flick which kick-started the whole inglorious Italian cannibal cycle, and Aldo Lado’s haunting giallo *Who Saw Her Die?* (both 1972), which exerted a huge albeit unacknowledged influence over Nic Roeg’s *Don’t Look Now* (1973). Turning direction



to a run of US/Italian co-productions, Assonitis (under his reliable “Oliver Hellman” alias) made an immediate and enormous impact on US box offices with 1974’s *Beyond the Door* (aka *Chi sei?* and *The Devil Within Her*), in which Richard Johnson and Juliet Mills contend for the soul of her unborn child who, it is suggested, might well be the Antichrist. Rattled off in quick-fire response to *The Exorcist* (1973) yet in some ways anticipating the themes of Richard Donner’s *The Omen* (1976), this one was delivered smartly enough to capitalise on public interest in the William Friedkin biggie. As distributed in the US by the energetic Film Ventures International (who worked similar wonders with the likes of William Girdler’s *Grizzly* [1976] and Juan Piquer Simon’s *Pieces* [1982]), it turned a \$350,000 investment into takings of \$15 million (\$40 million worldwide), though a significant portion of these profits were subsequently eaten up in a lawsuit that Warner Brothers successfully launched over copyright infringement.

Indeed, aside from the occasion when he took over *Piranha II: The Spawning* (aka *Piranha II: Flying Killers*, 1981) from future *Terminator*, *Titanic* and *Avatar* director James Cameron, after “personal and artistic differences”, Assonitis’s infrequent forays behind the camera are best remembered for the audacity with which he cashed in on big American hits. *Tentacles* (1977) was a rather late breaking attempt (by his standards) to ride the wave initiated two years earlier by Spielberg’s *Jaws*. Not to be confused with Jim Clark’s identically-titled 1974 teaming of Price, Cushing and Quarry, *Madhouse* (1981) is Assonitis’s shot at the stalk-and-slash formula that had turned John Carpenter’s *Halloween* (1978) into the most financially lucrative independent movie of all time, a record that stood until various of the *Nightmare on Elm Street* sequels finally outperformed it in the mid-80s.

Curiously for an Italian/American co-production, *Madhouse* (also known, for reasons that will soon become apparent, as both *And When She Was Bad* and *There Was a Little Girl*) eschewed the *giallo* influence that had been so apparent in *Halloween* and Sean Cunningham’s *Friday the 13th* (1980), opting instead for a claustrophobic *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?*-type atmosphere. Julia Sullivan (Trish Everly) is an attractive, idealistic young teacher, dedicated to the education of her deaf pupils. A sensitive plant, she feels guilty over the plight of her hopelessly mad, deformed twin Mary (Allison Biggers), feelings that are encouraged by her uncle, Father James (Dennis Robertson), a neurotic priest who appears to be obsessed with the subject of family life. Mary resides in a local sanatorium but seems to exert a strange telepathic influence over her sibling (“There’s nothing logical between Mary and me,” agonises Julia, “It’s much different from that. I know what she knows, feel what she feels... to some extent I am what she is!”). This, we are told, has been going on since they were kids, which wasn’t the only weird aspect of their childhood... on Julia’s birthdays, Mary would stick needles into her and burn her with matches. Their blinkered parents put these wounds down to psychosomatic

manifestations of the nightmares Julia suffered about an aggressive Rottweiler. When she learns that her sister is dying, Julia visits the sanatorium to offer her an olive branch but all she gets in response is resentment and threats to reduce her pretty face to “a pretty close approximation” of contrary Mary’s ravaged features. Events take an even more sinister turn in the run up to Julia’s 25th birthday, when various friends and associates of hers are attacked by an aggressive Rottweiler and finished off by a maniac wearing woolly blue mittens (rather than the more traditional black leather gloves). In the face of all this, our heroine’s premonitions of doom are ignored by her useless psychiatrist.

To take her mind off all these troubles, somebody’s organising a surprise birthday party for Julia and what a surprise it will be... assuming, that is, she hasn’t already seen J. Lee Thompson’s Canadian entry in the body count stakes, *Happy Birthday to Me*, which was also released in 1981.

The film’s denouement reveals an unexpected accomplice in the foregoing kill spree who, when challenged about their motivation, declaims the immortal lines...

*“There was a little girl and she had a little curl,
Right in the middle of her forehead.
And when she was good, she was very, very good,
And when she was bad... she was horrid!”*

No doubt we’re supposed to conclude that this character is irredeemably crackers and that’s the end of it; but if, like Julia, you believe that this explanation simply won’t wash, Assonitis thoughtfully winds things up with an apposite quote from George Bernard Shaw.

*“Life differs from the play only in this...
It has no plot.
All is vague, desultory, unconnected,
Till the curtain drops with the mystery unsolved.”*

Shaw thing...

In an echo of the *Piranha II* debacle (that’s twice in one year!) Assonitis started filming *Madhouse* with an unidentified rookie director who apparently failed to make the grade after the first few days of shooting. Taking on the film’s direction himself, he cut costs further by employing mainly tried-and-tested TV actors (Dennis Robertson’s CV includes Frank De Felitta’s fondly remembered *Dark Night of the Scarecrow*, also from 1981) although, amazingly, the role of Julia turned out to be the only screen appearance of the



likeable Trish Everly. Whatever happened to her? All concerned turn in solid performances. Assonitis's go-to cinematographer Roberto D'Ettorre Piazzoli contrives an effective deep-fried Southern gothic, making exemplary use of the Savannah, Georgia location, which was hosting various Italian shoots round about this time, including Lucio Fulci's memorable zombies vs rednecks gorefest *City of the Living Dead* (aka *Gates Of Hell*, 1980) and – yet another 1981 production – Enzo G. Castellari's audacious and much-injuncted *Jaws* rip-off, *The Last Jaws* aka *The Last Shark / Great White* (which was also distributed by Film Ventures International). Prolific composer Riz Ortolani provided the music, his 229 (!) film credits including the lush scores for Gualtiero Jacopetti and Franco Prosperi's groundbreaking *Mondo Cane* (1962), Lucio Fulci's giallo tour de force *Don't Torture a Duckling* (1972) and Ruggero Deodato's über-controversial *Cannibal Holocaust* (1980).

Although *Madhouse* runs mainly on atmosphere, it is regularly punctuated by fairly gory sequences including those Rottweiler attacks, a never properly explained flashback to a kid beating another about the head with a stone, a protracted axe attack and most notoriously (spoiler alert!) a canine lobotomy conducted via Black & Decker. The artifice behind the latter sequence is easily discernible but *Madhouse* had the misfortune to be released on UK home video just as the “nasties” witch hunt was gathering momentum and it ended up on the Director of Public Prosecution's (DPP) list of proscribed titles along with plenty of others whose presence on that list seem, in retrospect (and seemed to many of us at the time), pretty puzzling. On the plus side, *Madhouse's* “nasty” status has guaranteed it an ongoing level of fan interest and collectability that hasn't applied to many equally well made little chillers from the same era.

Symptomatic of the confused and arbitrary manner in which the whole “nasties” campaign was conducted, Medusa's original UK video release of *Madhouse* (in January 1983) went largely ignored. Later that year, presumably in response to growing media rumblings about the pernicious influence of home video, the company released a truncated version from which 75 seconds of violence had been excised: 18 seconds from the first dog attack (a victim's hand being bitten off, followed by his throat being gored); 14 seconds from the subsequent dog attack during which Julia's friend Helen is severely mauled; 11 seconds from the axe attack sequence; and a hefty 32 seconds of the dog vs power drill set piece. Ironically, it was upon this version that the police swooped, mindful perhaps of the truly mind-boggling warning from Graham Bright MP (who lent his name to the parliamentary Bill which became the 1984 Video Recordings Act [VRA]) that dogs, no less than children and vulnerable adults, could be adversely affected by the “nasties”. Whatever the case, it was this already bowdlerised version that got consigned to the DPP's list of shame in November 1983. Mainstream as it now seems, *Madhouse* remained on that list until it was officially wound up (when the VRA hit the statute books) alongside the infinitely more lurid likes of

Anthropophagous: The Beast, Blood Feast, Cannibal Holocaust, The Driller Killer, Faces of Death, The Last House on the Left, S.S. Experiment Camp and Snuff. By the turn of the century reason had prevailed, people were wondering what all the fuss had been about and one after another, the bulk of the “video nasties” started coming in from the cold. *Madhouse* was certified “18”, uncut by the BBFC for a 2004 DVD release on the Film 2000 label that looked excellent but suffered from poor sound. Now a characteristically painstaking Arrow edition affords us the chance to give Assonitis's atmospheric little shocker the critical reappraisal which it so richly deserves.

Perhaps the final word should go to the irrepressible Ovidio G. Assonitis himself: “All in all, I am sadly aware that my contributions to the horror genre are not of such historical relevance as, say, *The Exorcist* or *Psycho*. We're not talking masterpieces here, but I have put all of my love and enthusiasm into my films and I think it shows. What's most important, I have gained the respect of true horror fans, who are always loyal and extremely perceptive... they know a good film when they see one!”

John Martin has been a commentator on exploitation cinema and censorship issues for over thirty years and is the author of Seduction of the Gullible: The Truth Behind the Video Nasty Scandal.





ABOUT THE TRANSFER

Madhouse was exclusively restored by Arrow Films and is presented in its original aspect ratio of 2.35:1 with 5.1 and 2.0 stereo sound.

The original 35mm camera negative was scanned in 2K resolution at Eurolab, Rome. The film was graded and restored on the Nucoda grading system at R3store Studios, London. Thousands of instances of dirt, debris, scratches and other instances of film wear were repaired or removed through a combination of digital restoration tools and techniques.

The original English language 4-track stereo mix was transferred from the original Dolby mag reels and has been newly remastered to 5.1 at L'Immagine Ritrovata, Bologna. There are instances throughout the film in which the audio synchronisation will appear slightly loose against the picture, due to the fact that the soundtrack was recorded in post-production.

Restoration Supervised by **James White, Arrow Films**

The original film and audio elements for *Madhouse* were made available for this restoration by **Ovidio Assonitis**

PRODUCTION CREDITS

Disc and Booklet Produced by **Ewan Cant**
Executive Producers **Kevin Lambert, Francesco Simeoni**
Technical Producer **James White**
QC Manager **Nora Mehenni**
Blu-ray/DVD Mastering & Subtitling **The Engine House Media Services**
Artist **Marc Schoenbach**
Design **Obviously Creative**

SPECIAL THANKS

Alex Agran, Ovidio Assonitis, Gilles Barberis, Federico Caddeo, Danilo Capodiferro, Elijah Drenner, Gerry Gedge, Jo Griffin, Daniel Griffiths, Laura Indiveri/Eurolab, Edith Ivey, Sonia Molteni, Alessia Navantieri, Caterina Palpacelli, Roberto D'Ettore Piazzoli, Davide Pozzi, Elena Tammaccaro/L'Immagine Ritrovata and Rich Watson/R3store Studios.
Reverse sleeve artwork courtesy of VHSCollector.com.



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