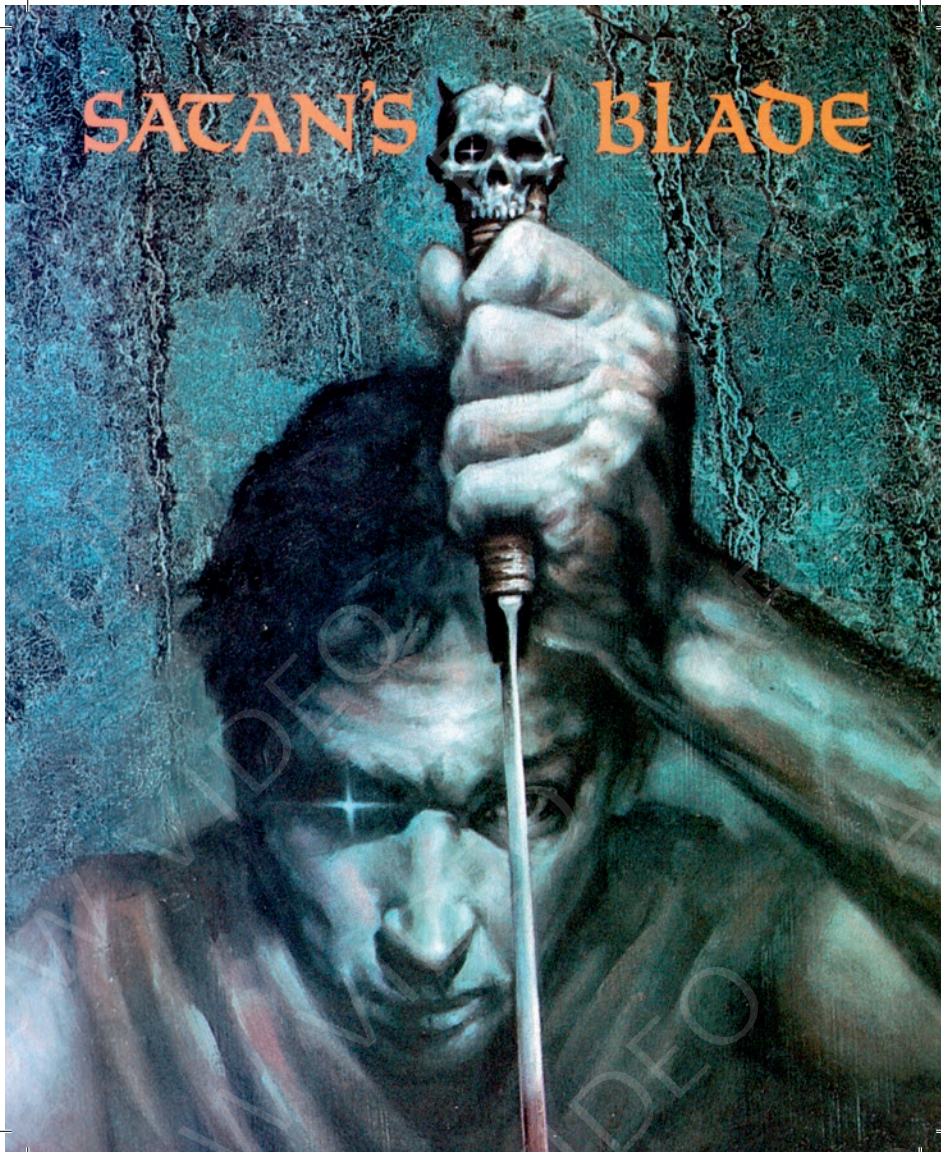



SATAN'S BLADE





SATAN'S BLADE

CAST

TOM BONGIORNO as Tony
STEPHANIE LEIGH STEEL as Stephanie
THOMAS CUE as Al
ELISA R. MALINOVITZ as Lisa
JANEEN LOWE as Lil
SKI MARK FORD as Ski (George)

CREW

Produced and Directed by **L. SCOTT CASTILLO, JR.**
Story by **L. SCOTT CASTILLO, JR.**
Screenplay by **THOMAS CUE**
Director of Photography **TERRY KEMPF**
Music and Editing by **MARTIN JAQUISH**



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TWO BLOODY ROADS DIVERGED IN A WOOD

by Brian Albright

Satan's Blade arrived on VHS in the US via the Prism label in 1985, part of a group of horror movies the company released that fall along with Joel. M. Reed's *Night of the Zombies* (1981), *Crucible of Terror* (1971) and the bizarre *The Orphan* (1979). It jockeyed for shelf space at video stores with five years' worth of slasher films that had been released in the wake of Sean S. Cunningham's wildly successful *Friday the 13th* in 1980. The 1984/1985 period alone saw the release of *Girls Nite Out*, *Silent Night*, *Deadly Night*, *Splatter University*, *The Mutilator*, *The Nail Gun Massacre*, *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, the misleadingly titled *Friday the 13th: The Final Chapter* and its sequel, *Friday the 13th: A New Beginning*, along with several others.

In a crowded slasher marketplace, *Satan's Blade* slipped into relative obscurity, despite several subsequent VHS releases both in North America and overseas. Its nondescript Canadian video box art, featuring some hands grasping a dagger in front of a demon head, wound up being used for the All-American Video release of the Spanish horror film *Satan's Blood* (*Escalofrío*, 1978), further obscuring the film's history and reputation.

The few reference books that bothered to mention *Satan's Blade* wrote it off as a very low-budget copy of *Friday the 13th*, with some elements of *The Evil Dead* (1981) worked in. A few later reviewers even noted that 'final girl' Stephanie Leigh Steel cops *Friday the 13th Part 2* (1981) heroine Amy Steel's survival strategy of hiding under the bed to escape the killer during the climax.

In the context of that all-to-familiar narrative, *Satan's Blade* was just another also-ran horror film. But that narrative is wrong.

Yes, it's meandering, sometimes confusing and amateurishly acted. It's also a film that was conceived and filmed early in 1980, free from any influence from *Friday the 13th*, its sequels, or just about any other movie that it has been accused of referencing. In that context, it's a stranger and more interesting (if still marginal) item.

Satan's Blade was produced and directed by L. Scott Castillo, Jr. a confident novice with no previous directing experience. According to Castillo, in addition to serving in Vietnam, he has at various times been a professional tap dancer, a bank officer, and a real estate agent.

He dove into film production without hesitation, despite his lack of experience. "I've always pretty much been able to do whatever I wanted to," he says.

It was shot in the spring of 1980 at Big Bear Lake, late enough in the season that Castillo and his crew had to truck in snow from higher elevations and then shovel it onto the ground around their rented cabins to maintain continuity. Cunningham's groundbreaking body-count film was released just a few months later, and irrevocably altered the genre for the next several years as other filmmakers rushed to cash-in.

While Castillo doesn't cite any specific influences, his lone foray into the horror genre was created for a market that had already seen the successful releases of John Carpenter's *Halloween* (1978), *Tourist Trap* (1979), and the somewhat thematically similar *Savage Weekend* (1979).

The film, had it been released more quickly, would have been part of the first generation of *Halloween*-inspired slashers, a diverse clutch of films that included *Don't Answer the Phone*, *Maniac*, *Mother's Day*, *Terror Train* and *Silent Scream*, all released in 1980. After *Friday the 13th* and *Prom Night* (also 1980), this strain of the genre largely codified around teenagers and college students getting murdered in a handful of interchangeable settings. The bickering married couples and infrequent kill sequences of *Satan's Blade* were out of place in a post-*Friday* world.

So *Satan's Blade* is less of a knock-off and more of a road not taken in the genre. It's an evolutionary dead-end, like the Neanderthal or the diminutive, hobbit-like Flores Man discovered in Indonesia. Without Cunningham's film providing a cookie-cutter template to follow, the pre-*Friday the 13th* slasher films went off in all sorts of wild directions. In Castillo's case, the road led to a cabin in a very different neck of the woods.

A Monster of Death

Like many of the film's slasher contemporaries, *Satan's Blade* sports an unrelenting synthesizer and piano score, but the similarities largely end there. The movie opens with a non-sequitur robbery sequence in which two masked bandits snatch cash from a sparsely decorated bank, shoot the clerks, and then hightail it to a cabin in the woods. There, we discover both that they are women and that they are extremely anxious to take off their pants.

This promisingly absurd plot ends abruptly with the arrival of a knife-wielding killer. Every single character we've seen up to that point is dead within the first 15 minutes.





Cut to the following day at snowy, picturesque Big Bear Lake. Two married couples and a van-load of college girls arrive for a week's vacation, and opt to stay despite the recent murders and the ominous intonations of the lodge owner's mother about the spirit of a giant mountain man who roams the hills. "He has become a monster of death, and stalks all who come to these mountains," she warns the Jordache- and velour-clad tourists.

Satan's Blade takes a *long* time to get around to slaughtering its campers, so Castillo spiced up the first half of the film with a cheat dream sequence in which a burly killer in a creepy mask bursts into the cabin and rapidly kills all the college girls. That scene is actually more suspenseful (and certainly more surreal) than what comes later; it's quick, brutal, and leaves you wanting a lot more scenes like *that*, and a lot fewer scenes of people fishing, and talking about their feelings, and talking about their feelings while they're fishing.

Finally, nearly an hour later, the real killer shows up and dispatches the bulk of the cast before having his identity revealed in a confusing twist ending that Castillo optimistically uses to set up a possible sequel.

'I'm just running through this money anyway'

Like many low-budget films of the period, *Satan's Blade* was privately financed. In this case, Castillo had a friend (Patrick McIntosh, who receives a special thanks in the end credits) who inherited a significant amount of money when his mother passed away. He knew Castillo wanted to make a movie, and offered him \$50,000 to produce a horror film.

"I turned him down," Castillo says. "He came back and offered it to me again. The third time, he said, 'Look, I've got this condo and I bought a Corvette. I'm just running through this money anyway.' So that time I said yes."

Castillo got most of his cast and crew from the San Diego area. Lead actor Tom Bongiorno came via the theatre department at Mesa City College, where a faculty member had recommended that he and Stephanie Leigh Steele (who plays the main co-ed) audition.

The movie was shot a few hours north at Big Bear Lake, a picturesque spot that had served as a location for countless episodes of *Bonanza* (1959-73), as well as horror films like Fred F. Sears' *The Werewolf* (1956), *Giant from the Unknown* (1958), and Robert F. Slatzer's absurd *Bigfoot* (1970).

Castillo rented two cabins, where he was able to film without permits and house his cast



and crew economically. The majority of the film was shot in and around the cabins in roughly 30 days.

In interviews, the cast and crew have generally described Castillo as enthusiastic, but inexperienced. The saving grace of the production was cinematographer Terry Kempf, who provided some much-needed technical expertise for the novice director, cast and crew. "A buddy of mine in the union said he was auditioning for this movie, and since I knew how to operate a camera I should come talk to the guy in charge," Kempf says. "He gave me a rough script. I broke it down and told him I thought we could get it shot and in the can for \$60,000."

Castillo had outlined the story, but actor Thomas Cue fleshed out the script while Kempf handled the technical details.

"I had done some assistant camera work, and I'd done lighting for theatre, but my experience at the time was not in 35mm," Kempf says. "Scott had never directed anything. Our first scene we shot was the young couple in front of the fireplace talking. We shot a master of that, and Scott said, 'Okay, let's go next door.' I said, 'Don't you want close-ups?' He told me I could go ahead and shoot those if I wanted to. We did not have a lot of coverage."

Kempf brought along Richard Taecker as assistant cameraman and still photographer. Taecker also stepped in front of the camera as the lodge keeper when the original actor couldn't participate, and even wound up playing the masked killer in the dream sequence.

Also on hand was special effects veteran Paul Batson (who plays the older fisherman in the film). Batson owned a company called Woochie Industries, which anyone who worked in theatre or managed a Jaycees Haunted House in the 1980s will remember for their line of economical false noses, stage blood and pre-made gore prosthetics.

The film was shot in 35mm because Castillo felt it had a better chance of getting theatrical distribution that way. The video market was still relatively nascent at that point, and because the industry was consolidating it was harder to get independent films into distribution. The choice to shoot in 35mm increased the budget, but did make the film look better. This is particularly true of the exterior shots, which take advantage of the impressive landscapes.

After the initial shoot, Castillo had to raise more money from some East Coast relatives who were involved in television and theatre management, and continued raising funds during post-production. A year later, he filmed the opening bank robbery sequence (Kempf had left the production at that point). The wall calendar in that scene indicates it was filmed in







the winter of 1981.

Satan's Blade had a premiere screening at the Ken Cinema in San Diego on Sept. 25, 1982. Castillo then peddled the film to a number of film distributors in LA (who all turned him down), before finally selling it for overseas distribution and home video. Castillo says he never saw any of the back-end money from those sales, but his film was distributed in multiple countries on several VHS labels, including Galaxy, Mogul, Video Motions, Trend, and All-American Video, and as far away as Argentina and Germany.

(It was not unusual for this type of independent film to be distributed more widely overseas. According to James Kendrick's essay on the "video nasties" in Steffen Hantke's 2004 book *Horror Film: Creating and Marketing Fear*, roughly 80% of sales for American low-budget films on video were generated in Europe in the 1980s. There were even a few American horror films that *only* received foreign video releases at the time.)

Only a handful of the cast and crew of *Satan's Blade* continued in the entertainment industry. Kempf is still active as a prop maker and construction coordinator in TV and film, while Taecker works as a professional photographer. Bongiorno took a stab at writing and producing a project that never got off the ground. He claims he once rented every copy of *Satan's Blade* in Las Vegas and 'lost' them so his co-workers wouldn't see the film. He later worked successfully as a Neil Diamond impersonator.

Castillo went into real estate. He recently completed a new film, which he describes as a "sexploitation cop drama," and is toying with the idea of shooting the *Satan's Blade* sequel that was teased at the end of the original film but never produced.

Satan's Blade itself, meanwhile, has found a new audience via digital media and obsessed VHS collectors. Despite its deficiencies, it is a slasher film that is strangely (almost refreshingly) free from the influences of the more commercial horrors that would dominate the genre just a few years later; it's an awkward, bloody glimpse of what these films might have looked like without the shadow of *Friday the 13th* looming over them.

Production details for this essay were gleaned from the author's interviews with L. Scott Castillo, Jr. and Terry Kempf, along with information from interviews with Richard Taecker, Tom Bongiorno, and Stephanie Leigh Steele featured on the Hysteria Lives! website.

Brian Albright is a freelance writer and editor whose work has appeared in Fangoria, VideoScope, Shock Cinema and SCREAM magazines. He is the author of Regional Horror Films, 1958-1990: A State-by-State Guide with Interviews and Wild Beyond Belief!

ABOUT THE TRANSFER

Satan's Blade is presented in both 1.85:1 and 1.33:1 aspect ratios for this release. The original soundtrack is presented in mono 1.0.

The film was graded and restored by the filmmaker L. Scott Castillo, Jr. using the best quality original picture and audio elements available. The quality of this presentation of *Satan's Blade* may vary at times, but this is in keeping both with the nature of the film's low-budget production origins and the condition of the materials.

PRODUCTION CREDITS

Disc and Booklet Produced by **Ewan Cant**

Executive Producer: **Francesco Simeoni**

Production Assistant: **Liane Cunje**

Technical Producer: **James White**

QC and Proofing: **Ewan Cant, Nora Mehenni, Anthony Nield**

Subtitling: **dayfornight***

Authoring: **Digital Cinema United**

Artist: **Matt Ryan Tobin**

Design: **Jack Pemberton**

SPECIAL THANKS

Alex Agran, L. Scott Castillo, Jr. and The Hysteria Continues.
Original artwork courtesy of VHSCollector.com.







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