

FILM REVIEW

Skinned Deep

A Center Ring Entertainment production. Produced, directed, written by Gabriel Bartalos. Camera (color), Peter Streitman; editor, Christopher Seguire; music, David Davidson; art director, Steve Lawrence; special makeup f/x, Atlantic West Effects; visual f/x, Al Magliochetti; makeup and hair, Cessa Ventre; sound, Daniel Bijan, Mark Setrakian. Reviewed at San Francisco Horror Festival, March 23, 2004. Running time: 97 MIN.

With: Karoline Brandt, Jay Dugre, Aaron Sims, Kurt Carley, Peter Iasillo, Liz Little, Warwick Davis, Linda Weinrib, Eric Bennett, Lee Kociela, Forrest J. Ackerman.

By DENNIS HARVEY

Skin Deep" is an impressively berserk horror-comedy debut for writer-helmer Gabriel Bartalos, who's previously done f/x work on fantasy projects as diverse as Matthew Barney's "Cremaster" artpics, Frank Henenlotter's cult horror features and mainstream slasher pics. Those influences are apparent here, as are echoes of "The Texas Chainsaw Massacre," "Eraserhead" and "Mad Max." Tale of a girl trapped by maniacal rural clan is more a series of whacked-out set pieces than anything else, and it may wear out many viewers by going so incessantly over-the-top. Nonetheless, this is the stuff cult followings are made of.

After credit segment showing an unlucky truck driver involved in a not-so-accidental crash during a driving rainstorm, pic opens on the all-American Rockwells mid-vacation: Cartoonishly cheerful mom (Linda Weinrib) and ditto dad (Eric Bennett), bored teen Tina (Karoline Brandt) and bratty little brother Matthew (Lee Kociela).

When their station wagon gets a flat tire in the proverbial middle-of-nowhere — and no one notices the trap that gouged the tire — family goes to sickeningly-sweet Granny's (Liz Little) nearby desert cafe. She ushers them on to her little house across the way, to wait for a repairman who will never come.

The manse's creepy-clutter decor might set off alarms in brighter minds than these, but these folks don't even head for the exits when Granny introduces her own "family" over an entrails-entree dinner.

Members include the metal-chopper-mouthed Surgeon General (billed as played by both Aaron



The effects are the star — the metal-mouthed Surgeon General is seen here — in Gabriel Bartalos' over-the-top "Skinned Deep."

Sims and Kurt Carley), enormous-noggined Brain (Jay Dugre) and vicious little Plates (Warwick Davis), so named for the kitchenware he hurls with deadly accuracy.

In any case, the Rockwells' good manners soon count for naught as mom and dad are abruptly made mincemeat of. Sis and bro flee into the desert; they don't get very far before Tina becomes an only child, her life preserved only so Frankensteinian Brain can have a "bride" of his very own.

Pic piles excess upon excess, its sheer outlandishness and grotesquerie emerging at once funny and perversely monotonous.

Nonstop high energy actually works against cumulative sense of hysteria, with just a few sequences (one memorable streaking scene, an oldster-vs.-Plates fight to the death) inspired enough to transcend bad-taste silliness.

Still, "Skinned Deep" manages a more bizarre edge than the average Troma campfest, or even Rob Zombie's bigger-budgeted, not dissimilar exercise "House of 1,000 Corpses."

General gonzo spirit and wide array of schlock gore/fantasy effects (Bartalos presides over f/x micro-studio Atlantic West Effects) will delight jaded genre fans.

Clearly a labor of horror-film-geek love (psychotronic icon Forrest J. Ackerman has a small part), pic exudes tech/design panache on likely small budget.

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