

The Review Cinema

AMERICAN MARY

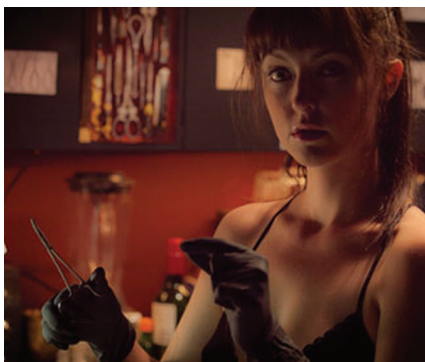
Directed by Jen Soska, Sylvia Soska

The clarity and precision of *American Mary*, the new horror offering from Canadian directors and identical 'Twisted Twins' Jen and Sylvia Soska, stands in marked contrast to their raw, no-budget breakthrough *Dead Hooker in a Trunk*. In more ways than just the title, the former is a much more subtle film, and demonstrates how impressive the sisters and their distinctive style can be, given any budget at all.

It tells the story of medical student and aspiring surgeon (or 'slasher') Mary Mason, wonderfully portrayed by the laconic Katharine Isabelle, who stumbles upon the sinister but lucrative world of 'body modification' and literally carves out a new career for herself. After a brutal, sexual attack by one of her surgical lecturers, she abandons medicine and turns her skills toward this twisted, underground cosmetic surgery, helping her misfit clientele to 'express' themselves through a 'mod menu' of procedures such as 'tongue-splitting' or 'voluntary amputation'. She even performs an 'appendage exchange' on the 'Demon Twins of Berlin' (cameo by the Soska sisters themselves) and with the help of strip-joint manager Billy (Antonio Cupo) finds time to exact gruesome revenge on her lecturer (who serves as something of a practice subject for her new-found speciality).

Needless to say, surgeons are not portrayed kindly. Laughing that they 'cut up people for a living', it is their ruthless treatment of Mary that transforms her from a vulnerable student with financial issues, to the unflinching 'Bloody Mary', sauntering from one grisly scene to the next. But the gore is not gratuitous and the violence is more implied than graphic. *American Mary*

Katharine Isabelle as American Mary.



does not make you jump out of your seat, opting instead for intelligent dark humour and psychologically disturbing scenarios in seedy surroundings. Rather than a collection of conventional ghoulish scares, the Soska sisters achieve a memorable and suitably gothic visual, of Mary in red surgical scrubs and black latex gloves operating to the sound of soothing piano arpeggios, or practicing suturing on raw turkeys.

The plot line brings new meaning to doctor-patient confidentiality, as Mary evades discovery by the authorities, and reaches a gory but rather poignant denouement, when she is finally faced with the consequences. Remarkably, *American Mary* was shot in only 15 days, yet does not feel constrained or rushed, and with an outstanding lead performance from Isabelle, it is a refreshingly understated and funny tribute to its two talented creators.

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DJANGO UNCHAINED

Directed by Quentin Tarantino

Set in America's Deep South 2 years before the Civil War, German former dentist turned bounty hunter Dr King Schultz (Christoph Waltz) purchases the slave Django (Jamie Foxx). Schultz is after a trio of outlaws, the notorious Brittle brothers, and only Django can identify them. In return for fingering the brothers Schultz offers Django his freedom and trains him as a bounty hunter, taking him on as his partner.

Together the two men spend the winter collecting bounties before setting out to rescue Django's wife Broomhilda (Kerry Washington) from the clutches of moustache-twirling villain Calvin Candie (Leonardo DiCaprio), owner of the infamous Candyland plantation, where he trains male slaves as 'mandingo' fighters for vicious human cockfights while prostituting the female slaves. When Django and Schultz infiltrate Candyland under false pretences however, they arouse the suspicions of Candie's duplicitous house-slave Stephen



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(Samuel L Jackson) setting in motion a spiral of violence that ends in a bloody showdown.

There's a scene near the start of Mel Brooks' gut-busting 1974 comedy Western *Blazing Saddles* when the railroad foreman, Taggart (veteran character actor Slim Pickens), informs his henchman, Lyle (Burton Gilliam), that there may be quicksand ahead. When Lyle offers to send a team of horses ahead to test the ground, Taggart smacks him upside the head saying: 'Horses? We can't afford to lose any horses, you dummy! Send over a couple of n*****s'.

It's a throwaway moment of angry eloquence that, in one scene, lays bare over two centuries of American racism, illuminating a brutally stark, uncomfortable truth; that the Land of the Free was built on oppression. In the context of the film, it's also shockingly funny. With his gory, cartoonishly violent reimagining of Sergio Corbucci's *Django*, *Django Unchained*, Quentin Tarantino, cinema's greatest magpie, loudly makes the same point for two and three quarter hours (um, racism and slavery bad!) while homaging (STEALING!) scenes here and there from his favourite Spaghetti Westerns and trying to set a Guinness World Record for use of the 'N-word'.

Funny and profane, packed full of entertaining cameos (Don Johnson and Jonah Hill as ineffectual Klansmen, original Django, Franco Nero) and awash with blood, the resulting collage may just be Tarantino's best film in years (certainly since *Kill Bill: Vol 1*) even if does feel at times like you're watching Sam Peckinpah's *Blazing Saddles*.

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