

MOVIE REVIEW

The Cell

Filmed in Squirm-a-Vision

By KENNETH TURAN
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Some movies make you sorry you've seen them, and "The Cell" is one of those. Creepy and horrific, it's a torture chamber film about a man who tortures women that puts viewers through as much misery as the people on the screen. In the year 2000, that's entertainment.

The debut film for both trendy commercial director Tarsem Singh and screenwriter Mark Protosevich, "The Cell" crystallizes many of the excessive obsessions of modern popular culture: blood, violence, bondage, expanded states of consciousness and bizarre sex. But mostly what it's about is torture.

Though the film stars Jennifer Lopez as Catherine Deane, an empathetic psychologist able to use sci-fi techniques to enter other people's minds, its central figure is a twitchy, demented serial killer (do the movies admit to any other kind?) named Carl Stargher (Vincent D'Onofrio), whose M.O. is re-created in nauseating detail.

First Stargher stalks and kidnaps women. Then he imprisons the victims in a water-tight cell and batters them with high-pressure jets of water: Repellent videos of these women whimpering and suffering are given lots and lots of play. Eventually the sufferers drown, but for the audience the fun is just beginning.

Stargher, who has somehow found the time to embed 14 steel rings in the flesh of his back, attaches these rings to dangling hooks and, horrifically suspended by his stretched skin alone, apparently (thankfully, one can't be sure) has sex with the corpse, which he then drowns in bleach until it resembles a doll. Which probably explains why this film is rated R instead of NC-17, a rating the MPAA seems to have forgotten is in its repertoire.

"The Cell's" central plot contrivance is that Stargher turns comatose just before his capture,

meaning that the only way to save his latest victim, imprisoned in a secret location, is for Deane to enter his "Welcome to My Nightmare" mind and find out where the young woman is.

That schizophrenic psyche would seem to be a don't-go-there location if ever there was one. But, encouraged by handsome FBI agent Peter Novak (Vince Vaughn), the plucky femme takes the plunge. It's not a happy decision.

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For not only does Deane encounter women in still more painful and demeaning situations, she gets embroiled with Stargher himself, "a king in a very twisted kingdom." No kidding. Soon "The Cell" is smoothly cutting back and forth between Deane being tormented in the madman's mind and his latest victim being brutalized in that watery chamber. All torture, all the time, all photographed (by Paul Laufer) and production designed (by Tom Foden) as if it were a TV spot for Chanel.

From the film's opening dream sequence (Lopez, relishing playing the diva in a pure white Eiko Ishioka dress, riding a jet-black horse over spotless sands against a cloudless blue sky), it's obvious that director Tarsem has the kind of slick but overripe visual facility that characterizes top-of-the-line European-style commercials.

Even moderate praise for any aspect of "The Cell," however, soon tastes like ashes because it's enervating to see cinematic skill put to such meretricious uses. This is a film where no opportunity for grotesqueness is lost, no possible nightmare scenario ignored, up to and including seeing someone's entrails extracted and twisted on a spit like so much link sausage. Just wait until the Gore-Lieberman forces get their hands on clips of that.

At its hollow core, "The Cell" is, regrettably, only the latest example of the push-the-envelope school of filmmaking that lives, like its largely male, largely teenage potential audience, only to go where others haven't been before. While it can be argued that putting women in jeopardy has been a film staple since the movies began, that even Dorothy ran into some trouble on the way to Oz, "The Cell" is graphic proof that we're not in Kansas anymore. Not even close.

The Cell, 2000. R, for bizarre violence and sexual images, nudity and language. A Caro-McLeod/Radical Media production, released by New Line Cinema. Director Tarsem Singh. Producers Julio Caro, Eric McLeod. Executive producers Donna Langley, Carolyn Manetti. Screenplay Mark Protosevich. Cinematographer Paul Laufer. Editors Paul Rubell, Robert Duffy. Costumes Eiko Ishioka, April Napier. Music Howard Shore. Production design Tom Foden. Art director Michael Manson. Set decorator Tessa Posnansky. Running time: 1 hour, 48 minutes. Jennifer Lopez as Catherine Deane. Vince Vaughn as Peter Novak. Vincent D'Onofrio as Carl Stargher. Marianne Jean-Baptiste as Dr. Miriam Kent. Jake Weber as Gordon Ramsey. Dylan Baker as Henry West.

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