

# "NYMPHA" Tiffany Shepis' bad religion

I must admit that making films here in Italy is very frustrating; raising money for a horror movie is almost an impossible thing," sighs Ivan Zuccon, the young Italian director who has been keeping the genre alive in the 21st century. A prophet is without honor in his own land, and as Zuccon's fifth feature *Nympha* achieves its U.S. DVD release this month from MTI, he ruefully admits that only one of his films has received distribution in his home country.

"There's little consideration for the horror genre here, so when I make a new movie, I principally consider the foreign markets, which for horror are of course the U.S., Japan and Germany," he explains. "This is why I chose an international cast and crew. I have to admit that working with people from different parts of the world was an extraordinary experience. The set of *Nympha* was so magical; there was an incredible atmosphere and a great feeling with all the people involved."

Benefitting from German investment and bearing a score by U.S. composer Richard (Re-Animator) Band, *Nympha* features an American actress (Tiffany Shepis) and a British actor (Allan McKenna) in lead roles. Yet the film is undeniably Italian, detailing the suffering of Sarah, an initiate who is tortured by Catholic nuns seeking to bring her closer to Christ and who seeks strength from a supernatural connection with a previous inhabitant of the convent.

"The original idea came from a unfilmed short script called *The New Order*, which I started writing because there were questions in my mind," Zuccon explains. "This script dealt with concepts of religion and death. Which is the right path that one must follow to find God? We know that you must die before you can meet Him, but if we consider death as the deprivation of all senses, maybe we can meet God in person without dying. You don't need your senses to live, it's just your soul that matters.

Maybe a person who can't hear, touch, see or talk can be very close to the Lord." Prior to casting Shepis as Sarah, Zuccon first

met the genre favorite at the Cannes Film Festival in 2000, when a distribution company Shepis was running picked up his debut movie *The Darkness Beyond*. "I tried to work with Tiffany for several years," he recalls, "but every time we were close to finding a way, the project fell through for budgetary reasons. When I met Tiffany at Cannes, I was immediately amazed by her attitude. She's not only pretty, sexy, funny and lovely, she is also a great actress! So it was natural for me to want her in one of my movies."

"*Nympha* was an awesome experience," Shepis says. "Not only did I get to play something totally different from my norm—the slutty, bitchy girl—I got to play a girl joining a New Order convent to become a nun. Me, a nun!

"Shooting the movie in a building hundreds of years old really added to the creepiness," she continues. "I would walk around this place with the movie's score on my iPod and totally freak myself out. They had a room in that house—which was more like a castle—that was originally used as a chapel, complete with church-style

paintings on the ceiling and stained-glass windows. You can't buy or build that type of set. Not for our budget, anyway."

*Nympha* could mark a new direction for Zuccon, whose previous films have mostly been based on or inspired by the works of H.P. Lovecraft. But the director, currently finishing an adaptation of the author's "The Colour Out of Space" called *Colour from the Dark*, sees a Lovecraftian influence even here. "If you just replace the Catholic aspect with some of the old gods, you have a Lovecraft film," he notes. "Think about it: In this movie we have an attic, and someone thinks there's a god locked inside. This is the 'Dunwich Horror' plot, right? Of course, this is not a true Lovecraft movie; there are only strong influences, that's all.

"The other central point of the film is family, he continues. "I always feel very comfortable when I have intense family conflicts in my movies. In *Nympha*, there's a terrible grandfather who destroys all his relatives through his religious fanaticism. I don't know why, but I'm very attracted to this type of story." Perhaps this is because Zuccon's own home life is so harmonious, with his parents helping on set and his young daughter making her acting debut in a small *Nympha* role.

"The Italians all shoot in a much more relaxed way than we do in America," Shepis says. "Everything in the States is rush, rush, rush... wait and rush. There, they take their time to eat, drink, chill, so that when we were on our 14th or 15th hour of shooting, people were still happy to be there. The crew almost acts like a family—and most of them are. Ivan's dad 'Papa Blood' was a pretty old fella, but that madman would be out there building sets at 5 a.m. on his day off. And his mom was the same way. She made all of our costumes and any type of linen for the set!"

—M.J. Simpson



