



THE ONLY FEMINIST SLASHER SERIES GETS THE SPECIAL EDITION TREATMENT WITH THE RECENT RELEASE OF THE *THE SLUMBER PARTY MASSACRE COLLECTION*. WE TRACK DOWN THE WOMEN BEHIND THE 'ULTIMATE DRILLER KILLER THRILLERS.'

# Only Women **BLEED**

BY APRIL SNELLINGS

**WHILE CAROL J. CLOVER'S 1992 BOOK *MEN, WOMEN, AND CHAIN SAWS: GENDER IN THE MODERN HORROR FILM* GAVE BIRTH TO THE NOTION OF THE FEMINIST PROTAGONIST** (the "Final Girl") in the slasher film, it has never been a level playing field. After all, you only get to be the Final Girl after the first girl, the penultimate girl and all the girls in between have ended up on the business end of a power tool.

Of course, we all know the rules the Final Girl must live by: she can dress, talk and fight like a man with impunity, but to make love like one or imbibe like one has long remained off limits. Filmmakers have subverted the trope for decades. Long before *Scream* earned critical kudos and box office millions by deconstructing the Final Girl and her battleground in the 1990s, the *Slumber Party Massacre* franchise laid the foundation.

The three films – recently re-released on DVD as part of Shout! Factory's Roger Corman's Cult Classics series – might seem unsophisticated when viewed through the post-modern lens of movies such as *High Tension* and *Behind the Mask*, but *SPM* and its two official sequels occupy an important niche in horror's cultural landscape. A full decade before Clover's book, *SPM* recognized the Final Girl trope and turned it on its bloody ear.

The first film was released in 1982 – the year that saw *Polyester* joined *E.T.* as one of the top box office earners; and the *Friday the 13th* and *Halloween* series both released their third installments; the previous year had already given us such cult faves as *The Burning* and *My Bloody Valentine*. The slasher genre was thriving, and legendary exploitation producer Roger Corman was eager to cash in.

At the same time, a young editor was looking to make her directorial debut. Amy Holden Jones, then 26, found a strange little curiosity gathering dust in whatever passed for a vault at Corman's New World Pictures: a horror script by feminist author Rita Mae Brown, best known for her lesbian coming-of-age novel *Rubyfruit Jungle* (think *Catcher in the Rye* with more oral sex). The script, titled *Don't Open the Door*, was intended as a feminist take on the slasher genre. Without bothering to ask permission, Jones enlisted a few student actors and her cinematographer husband, Michael Chapman, to shoot a prologue for the script. Jones cut the reel together on her pal Joe Dante's editing table, using music cues from Dante's *The Howling*. Chapman, a noted cinematographer, was fresh from shooting *Raging Bull*, so the prologue looked damn good – good enough to convince Corman to commit \$200,000 to complete the film and hire Jones to direct it.

"I did it as a directing sample only; I was shocked when Roger decided he wanted me to finish the film," recalls Jones. "I had never even read the rest of the script. When I did, I realized it was a mess. That was also the beginning of my career as a screenwriter, as the first thing I did was rewrite."

Since Jones had never seen a slasher film, she had serious catching up to do.

She recalls, "When I sat down and looked at *Halloween* and *Friday the 13th*, I realized how derivative [Brown's] original script was. I set out to both fulfill the requirements of the genre and make it somewhat unique. I was afraid of making something politically incorrect, but I also resented the label. By this time, directors like Francis Ford Coppola, Jonathan Demme and Martin Scorsese had all made exploitation films for Corman, so why not me?"

Jones doesn't remember much about Brown's original script – only that there was a slumber party and a killer with a big, um, drill. According to her, Brown's take on the genre was a fairly serious one, so she added liberal doses of humour.

**Tool's Out:** Kim (Debra Deliso, left) and Trish (Michelle Michaels) stalked by Russ Thorn (Michael Villella).

"The rewrite was enormous," she recalls. "I wrote all the set pieces, changed or created all the deaths, and reworked most of the characters. But the drill metaphor is Brown's. Most good horror scripts are a metaphor for an underlying fear. This one is about a teenage girl's terror of getting laid for the first time."

In true Corman fashion, *SPM* was shot in only twenty days. The crew had to be resourceful, since Corman's business model didn't allow for extravagant luxuries, such as, well, sets and electricity. "Sometimes Roger would take away our generator, saying we could light scenes using car headlights," Jones says. "Those days our grips would tap into city power lines. You could see the streetlights dim for miles."

Helped along by its iconic, phallic poster (Jones also directed the poster's photo shoot – see the iconic image on facing page), *SPM* was a success, which could only mean one thing: a sequel. This time around, directorial duties fell to Deborah Brock, who was head of post production at Corman's company. Brock had written a comedy script that failed to rouse Corman's interest, but he offered her a chance to direct a film he'd already sold to European distributors on its title alone: *Slumber Party Massacre II*. There was no script to go along with the title, though, so she wrote one.

"As long as it was a horror movie involving high school girls and a drill, I could make it pretty much what I wanted it to be," Brock recalls. "It was originally called *Don't Let Go: Slumber Party Massacre II*. We dropped the last part of the title while shooting because people don't particularly want to rent their house to a movie with the word 'Massacre' in the title."

So, was Corman's selection of a female director for the sequel intentional or coincidental? Brock isn't certain, but she hazards a guess: "Roger is very un-sexist. He's given more women first jobs as directors and producers than anyone in Hollywood. I don't know that he had hiring a woman specifically in mind, but he was always open to it. I think, mainly, Roger had a problem – he'd already sold the rights to the picture and he had to get it made. I told him I wanted to write and direct, and it was a match."

The film Brock made is unlike anything else that came out of that era (or any other). Part slasher film and part rockabilly musical, 1987's *SPM II* is completely insane and ridiculously entertaining. Heavily influenced by *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, it's a surreal blend of dream sequences, musical numbers and stalk-and-drill slasher fare.

"I wanted to do something unique that commented on the genre at the same time that it followed the form of a horror movie," asserts Brock. "[*SPM II*] is actually a deconstructed horror movie with a lot of dark humour and musical elements. It's the only horror movie I know of with a singing, dancing rockabilly villain."

Though the film is tame in the gore department, it ruffled feathers in England, getting itself banned by the country's Board of Censors. "They thought the mixture of sex, violence and rock music was particularly upsetting," recalls Brock. "Someone should have told them it was a comedy."

The franchise took a significantly darker turn in 1990 with its third installment. Corman stuck with the winning formula and hired a female staffer to helm the film: creative executive

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**SPM II DIRECTOR  
DEBORAH BROCK**



Sally Mattison, who had expressed an interest in directing. When he offered her the reins on *SPM III*, she quickly accepted, deciding to abandon the comedic tone of the first two films.

“I was somewhat uncomfortable with the depiction of violence in slasher films, arguably solely for entertainment value, and about violence in entertainment more generally,” she says. “I decided that if I were being asked to make a slasher film, I would give people what they seemed to want – more than they wanted, maybe, to get them to think about it. There is one very dark scene near the end of the film, when a character is cornered and killed, that was added after principal photography. Initially the scene was very brief. The film was running short, and my recollection is that Roger specifically wanted that scene lengthened and made more graphic. That is the scene that I’m most uncomfortable with. I’m not sure if I succeeded at all in getting people to think about the violence, particularly violence against women, the way I hoped to.”

The franchise’s influence is undeniable; the *SPM* films inspired a plethora of what filmmaker Jason Paul Collum (director of *Sleepless Nights: Revisiting the Slumber Party Massacres* documentary) calls the “girls in bloody nighties leg of horror” – movies such as *Sorority House Massacre 1 and 2* (which even incorporated footage from *SPM*), *The Sandy Hook Lingerie Party Massacre*, *Psycho Sleepover*, *The Last Slumber Party*, *House on Sorority Row*, *The Stay Awake* and even *The Sorority House Slumber Party Massacre*. Though the original franchise came to an end with its third installment, the series enjoyed something of a revival in 2003 with Jim Wynorski’s *Cheerleader Massacre*, which was co-produced by Corman and originally titled *SPMIV*. Though the title was eventually changed and the film has little in common with the series that inspired it, it did manage to revive one of the original film’s ill-fated characters. Linda, played by veteran horror actress Brinke Stevens, had a presumably fatal run-in with escaped mental patient Russ Thorn in *SPM*, but apparently got better in time to make an appearance in *CM*.

“Back when I’d first heard about *SPM II*, I asked if I could be in it – and the reply was, ‘But Brinke, you’re dead!’ In truth, you never actually saw me die, only heard a horrible off-camera scream.”

Stevens was eager to reprise her role for Wynorski’s spinoff, even if the part wasn’t quite as meaty as she would have liked. “I wish they’d had time to put some scars on my arms or chest to allude to my past trauma,” she says. “As it is, I’m remarkably unscarred... except perhaps mentally.”

Nearly 30 years after the release of the original *SPM*, viewers remain sharply divided about the franchise’s feminist trappings. To many, the films represent a rarity in the genre; besides being the only horror franchise helmed exclusively by women, the first installment, in particular, flips many of the genre’s typical gender roles.

“The stereotypical roles are reversed, with the girls being smart and strong, while the boys are more effeminate and constantly making poor decisions,” says Collum, whose three-part documentary is included with the re-release. “Lots of female empowerment with women doing ‘men’s’ jobs like carpentry, telephone repair, etc. And, in the post-*Halloween* world of Jamie Lee Curtis fighting back, these girls pick up power tools and use them... they fight for survival.”

“It’s definitely there,” says Brock, of *SPM II*’s feminist subtext. “Amy Holden Jones and Rita Mae Brown started it with the original *Slumber Party Massacre* and then Roger just continued with the women writer/directors. The young women in *SPM II* are independent and do and say what they want with a lot of freedom. Also, they are the ones who have to solve their problem in the end. There are no men to come to their rescue – they’re all dead or have rejected the whole idea of the ‘problem,’ as in the local police. In the end, Courtney has to face her own fears in the Driller Killer – who definitely represents a type of deranged masculinity – and destroy him.”

Mattison expresses a similar desire to address the genre’s treatment of women in her film; in particular, she wanted to do away with the familiar trope of the promiscuous girl being the first to die. “That bothered me as an unfair, double standard punishment of female sexuality,” she remembers. “In *SPM III*, the most promiscuous girl of the bunch doesn’t get bumped off first; she lasts a while. I tried to partly upend what I saw as the conventions of the genre, while working within it.”

The franchise’s detractors, on the other hand, offer a more cynical explanation; the films are perceived as feminist horror movies only because Corman was shrewd enough to market them as such.

“At the time of its release [*SPM*] was attacked by feminists, but that is absurd,” Jones says. “More boys die on camera, by far, than girls, and far more brutally, as well. This is the nature of the genre. It’s not about violence against women per se, any more than *The Omen* is about child abuse. I was a young feminist then and I’m a middle-aged one now. There were precious few strong women on screen at that point. I’ve made a whole career of trying to change that. This was the beginning, humble though it may be.”

**The Girl Gets It:** (top) *The Driller Killer* (Atanas Ilitch) wields his drill bit-headed guitar and (below) the gooey aftermath of Sally’s gigantic exploding zit from *SPM II*.