

BONE LAKE

MAKES HORROR HORNY AGAIN

THE LATEST ENTRY IN THE "AIRBNB NIGHTMARE"
SUBGENRE AMPS UP THE GORE — AND THE SENSUALITY.

By Kimberly Leszak



MERCEDES BRYCE MORGAN'S NEW FILM IS FLESHY. NOT THE WAXY, GERONTOPHOBIC BODY HORROR SORT. FLESHY LIKE THE RIPE PULP IN A WET, JUICY CHERRY PIERCED WITH A COCKTAIL SWORD. IN AN ERA OF LARGELY SEXLESS CINEMA, *BONE LAKE* IS READY TO SKIP THE TOE SKIMMING AND MAKE HORROR HORNY AGAIN. AFTER A SHOCKING GORE PORN OPENING SEQUENCE, THE FILM'S SUBSEQUENT CHOICES MAY NOT BE SEEN COMING BUT, OH BOY, DO THEY COME.



SEX AND DEATH: SAGE (MADDIE HASSON) AND CIN (ANDRA NECHITA, PREVIOUS PAGE) ILLUSTRATE THE BLOODY, BONER-Y BINARY OF THE FILM.

The director knew she'd bitten into something delectably complex when she first read the script penned by Joshua Friedlander. "I was at Sundance, and I dropped everything to read it. And what really attracted me to it was, yes, the fleshy quality — that's a great adjective to describe this movie — but also the fact that there were these plot twists that made me clutch my pearls and yell out loud, 'Oh my god, did that really just happen?'"

Morgan is most recently known to horror fans for her trippy and unhinged 2022 thriller *Spoonful of Sugar*, but this film takes her eccentric flair for intricacies to intimately fresh no-no places. Its premise: Two attractive young couples find themselves accidentally booked for the same luxury vacation rental, and decide to suck up the snafu and share the house for the weekend. What could go wrong?

Lots. You could pile on the trigger warnings in this film and still miss a few, but the artistic attention to detail demonstrates the difference between shocking and shock value. The cinematic threads nod to sexy Euro thrillers of the '70s with sultriness

woven so tightly that it shows up in the wallpaper. In *Bone Lake* food is sexy, bathtime is sexy, and sheer neon negligees are underwear again — we think that's pretty sexy, too.

"We reference a lot of different things. But not all horror influences," Morgan shares. "We looked at *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* because it's also 'couple pitted against couple in a house,' and seeing how that unfurls. But then there's so many horror references for horror fans in there. We looked at *Evil Dead 2* because that's some of the best shot design of all time, in my opinion, and a lot of other fun things sprinkled in there."

There are winding forest shots and pithy punchlines in *Bone Lake* to boot. Despite being entirely unsupernatural, though, the vibes at the film's seemingly quaint lakeside oasis are undeniably spooky.

The director is careful to avoid spoilers, but rest assured the experience of this film is more complicated than its twists, with irreplicable sensations and visceral responses to watching it. Much like reading the plot of *Let's Scare Jessica*

To Death or Spider Baby might spoil the twists, it's the atmosphere that endures as the meat of the watch.

There is also a surprising amount of humor in this very sexy and spiraling story that elicits a mixture of gasps and laughter from live audiences. "I think overall the most surprising, wonderful thing to me is how verbal audiences have been in the theater. I am a *Rocky Horror* fan through and through, and so my favorite movie theater experience is people yelling at the screen," the director states with a smile. "And I think what's been really wonderful is seeing people yell at the screen and getting excited. And I think you don't always see that in movie theaters, but this movie seems to create that reaction in people."

Set in a house that rivals grand haunted manors of cinema, Morgan knew this romantic getaway gone wrong was all about location, location, location. "We looked at a lot of different houses. I think it's especially hard with horror movies; there's this trope that's wonderfully done a lot, but it's the 'cabin in the woods,' or we've also seen a more modern version of that



recently. We wanted to do something that felt very aspirational as this fun, sexy getaway, but there's all of these rooms that you get to discover. With this house in particular, we found something that fit that purpose, but we also built a set within our house."

There's that attention to detail again. The location and the frame may have been perfect, but Morgan tells us that every single room had to be redone to get the dangerously erotic subtleties just so to bring these strange yet unnervingly convincing relationship dynamics to life.

If vacation rental horrors have been hot in the post lockdown film world, the topic of intimacy coordinators is hotter, and this is a film that could leave audiences wondering. The choice to use one is a no-brainer for Morgan, as it should be, and the sexy and violent production prioritized the safety of its cast at every step.

"I think that it should be approached the same way we approach a dancing or a fight scene," Morgan asserts, demonstrating this is the time and place for the choreography of sex. "Because at the end of day, they are actors — in the same way that they're not really getting stabbed, we're not actually having them engage in sex. If we approach it in a professional way, then everyone can feel good about it."

The psychological unraveling of the film's four main characters is just as intimate. We're presented with two couples: Andra Nechita's seductive femme Cin and Alex Roe's assured jock Will, and girl-next-door

Sage (Maddie Hasson) and bookishly handsome writer Diego (Marco Pigossi). All four are alluring archetypes of erotic fantasy, but the overt usage, Morgan knew, couldn't feel overdone. The electric chemistry of both couples had to flow in every direction to bring Morgan's vision to life.

Bone Lake has as many surprises for audiences as there are rooms in its sprawling mansion, and leaves audiences juicy with hope that more filmmakers will find comfort in less vanilla spaces. Throughout the film, there are moments of frivolity that just plunge suddenly and seamlessly into

drama. It's very unique to Morgan's work thus far, all rendered via indelible imagery (thanks to cinematographer Nick Matthews): an unforgettable chessboard scene, a bedroom timelapse reminiscent of the *Saw* franchise, and ample bisexual lighting in the BDSM room (that's right), all sandwiched cushily inside a stunning game of cat and mouse.

But what's it like to make a horror film with so many elements of discomfort that are heightened in a post-2020 world? Morgan has a lot of thoughts on that. "I like dark things that make me feel uncomfortable; it makes me feel more connected to other humans," she says. "If I read something that shocks me, I go, 'Oh, I feel alive.'"

And the film's sexuality, she knows, is part of that.

"I think it's bold," she says. "It's interesting because when I first started out directing years back, I was told 'take sex out of your pitch decks.' And then I was told 'put them back in.' I think that sexy movies are a recession indicator," she quips. "People want to punch through things. And I think this is very much where people go, 'You know what? Let's shake it up again. We feel like everything is so hard, let's just let loose.' And I think we see us constantly flip-flop. I'm so glad that we're back in our Sexy Movies era." 🍷

