

## a bell from hell

Contributed by chris d.  
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*A Bell From Hell* (*La Campana del Infierno*, 1973) is one of those rare meldings of arthouse and horror film, coming across like an unholy blend of Roman Polanski, Luis Buñuel and Mario Bava. A young man named John (Reynaud Verley) is released on probation from a psychiatric clinic. He finds brief employment at a slaughterhouse, then visits his Aunt Marta (Viveca Lindfors) and three beautiful cousins (Maribel Martin, Nuria Gimeno, Christine Betzner), gradually unspooling a complex revenge scheme. Soon the bubbling-under-the-surface poison of the aunt and the hypocritical, provincial inhabitants of the small town become all too apparent, and, however extreme John's practical jokes and grudge-fueled plans are, most of our sympathy lies with him. Indeed, as we learn more about John, about his free-spirited mother who committed suicide as a result of persecution from her family and friends, as we learn more about Aunt Marta, the cousins, the neighbors and the unhealthy atmosphere of repressed sexuality, we see disturbing parallels to not only the world's disaffected youth culture of the time but also the crumbling regime of Generalissimo Francisco Franco who still held Spain in his despotic grip until his death in 1975.

Renaud Verley, who portrays John, appeared in Juan Antonio Bardem's *Player Pianos* (1965 - alongside Melina Mercouri and James Mason). He was featured as well with Jane Birkin and Serge Gainsbourg in *The Dirty Dolls of Kathmandu* (*Les chemins de Katmandou*, 1969), co-starred in Kon Ichikawa's *To Love Again* (*At Futatabi*, 1971), played opposite Gina Lollobrigida and fellow Bell co-star Maribel Martin in 1973's *Mortal Sin* and had a supporting role in Claude Chabrol's *The Blood of Others* (1984). But Verley's most visible part remains Gunther Von Essenbeck, younger brother to Helmut Berger's demonic, debauched character in Luchino Visconti's *The Damned* (1969).

Actress Viveca Lindfors, who plays Aunt Marta, had done over a dozen films in her native Sweden before immigrating to America after WW2 and is certainly the most recognizable member of Bell's cast. She starred in two of director Don Siegel's earliest pictures, *Night Unto Night* (1949) and *No Time for Flowers* (1952), and was married to Siegel from 1948 to 1953. Some of her other genre films of note: Charlton Heston's debut picture *Dark City* (1950) directed by Byron Haskin, Fritz Lang's *Moonfleet* (1955), Joseph Losey's *These Are the Damned* (1963), plus other later efforts *Creepshow* (1982), *The Exorcist III* (1990) and *Stargate* (1994).

Maribel Martin, who appears as Esther the innocent cousin, began working in films as a child in 1961 and starred in Narciso Ibanez Serrador's *The House That Screamed* (*La Residencia*, 1969). Her most memorable role is that of Susan in Vicente Aranda's modern lesbian vampire tale *The Blood-Spattered Bride* (1972). Nuria Gimeno, who portrays the eldest cousin Theresa, also starred in several genre efforts, including *Orgies of Dr. Orloff* (1969) and *It's Nothing Mama, Only a Game* (aka *Beyond Erotica*, 1974 - co-starring with David Hemmings). Alfredo Mayo, who plays sanctimonious Pedro, has the most prodigious career as far as number of roles, having begun acting in motion pictures in 1935. He appeared in films such as Carlos Saura's *The Hunt* (*La Caza*, 1966) and scores of thrillers, including Jess Franco's *Attack of the Robots*, Sergio Bergonzelli's enjoyably sick and twisted *In The Folds of The Flesh* (1970) and Tonino Valerii's giallo *My Dear Killer* (1972).

Screenwriter Santiago Moncada was Spain's pre-eminent creator of bizarre genre scenarios, having to his credit such films as Mario Bava's *Hatchet for the Honeymoon* (1970), Eugenio Martin's *Death at the Deep End of the Swimming Pool* (aka *The Next Victim*, 1971), *Cut-Throats Nine* (1972), Sergio Martino's *All the Colors of the Dark* (1972), Juan Antonio Bardem's superior psycho-sexual thriller *The Corruption of Chris Miller* (1973), the inconsistent but genuinely delirious *Swamp of the Ravens* (1974) and the wonderfully titled *Your God, My Hell* (1975) - most of which were Italian or French co-productions with Spanish studios.

Director Claudio Guerin Hill's career was unfortunately a short-lived one. He had helmed several acclaimed Spanish TV productions as well as short films, but only one other feature, *The House of the Doves* (*La Casa De Las Palomas*, 1972) before *A Bell From Hell*. Unhappily, this disturbingly brilliant masterpiece of alienated and betrayed youth was to be his last picture. He either fell - or jumped - to his death from the bell tower featured in the film on the last day of shooting, and his mentor, the late Juan Antonio Bardem (a daring, acclaimed filmmaker in his own right and uncle to Javier Bardem), finished (uncredited) all post-production chores. Bardem had directed the previously-mentioned *Corruption of Chris Miller* (one of Jean Seberg's last films) as well as *Death of a Cyclist* (1955), a movie that not only won awards at the Cannes Film Festival but brought down the wrath of the Franco regime.

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