

Review of "Under the Raven's Wing"

by
Stacie Ponder, Contributing Writer April 1, 2008

The ups and downs of female friendships — and the sometimes terrible way we treat each other — have



been explored in works ranging from the film *Mean Girls* to Margaret Atwood's novel *Cat's Eye*. Writer-director Susan Adriensen gives the theme a horror bent in her film *Under the Raven's Wing*, the story of three young women whose intense friendship (yes, one night it leads to lesbianism) leads to murder.

Raven (Kimberly Amato), Angel (Kamilla Sofie Sadekova) and Jessie (Jessica Palette) share outsider status in their unnamed small town. Raven, the ringleader, tends toward the goth side of life and is prone to spouting off about the belief system she's devised.

According to Raven, there are different dimensions one enters after shuffling off this mortal coil, much like Dante's *Inferno*. The dimension one ends up in is dependent upon one's conduct during life. Raven claims she possesses the power to help people along to these other dimensions — to "transcend." Of course, what she calls "transcendence," you or I would call murder.

How Raven discovered these other layers of existence is never revealed — probably because it's all a big load of bull invented after a few too many trips to Hot Topic. Angel and Jessie, however, are true believers in Raven's philosophy, and they're more than willing to help her prove herself right. Raven plays off each girl's vulnerabilities and insecurities to keep them under her thumb and to ensure they become willing accomplices in murder. Wait — I meant "transcendence."

Kimberly Amato as "Raven"



In her bid for future fame, Raven has also enlisted the services of a young male filmmaker to document the entire process, from selecting the "lucky" victim to carrying out the horrid act itself. The young man remains nameless throughout, but he provides commentary as he gets drawn deeper and deeper into the bizarre world the three girls have made for themselves.

Under the Raven's Wing is filmed documentary-style, and the story unfolds in small segments from interviews to casual observances, all jumping back and forth through time.

While the movie falls most easily under the category of horror, at its core it's a psychological character study masquerading as a horror film. It hinges upon the relationship between the three leads and their interactions. Why would Angel and Jessie go to such lengths for Raven? Does Raven actually care about these girls, or is she simply exercising whatever power she can?

Some of these questions are answered, but certainly not all. Angel's mother has passed away, and Raven claims to still "see" her in the afterlife; Raven relays messages to Angel and lets her know on which "level" her mother's spirit resides. Meanwhile, Raven plays mother to Jessie, who's never really had an influential female role model in her life.

Jessica Palette ("Jessie") with Amato



The lines in their relationship become blurred, however, in a late-night dalliance caught on camera. As the three girls sleep on the floor, the director sets up a camera and climbs into bed alone. Eventually, moving blankets and various groans let us know that Raven and Jessie are having sex.

Soon thereafter, the director and Angel set about consummating their ongoing flirtation; when Raven catches sight of this, however, she quickly puts a stop to it by seducing the director herself before letting Angel and Jessie join in.

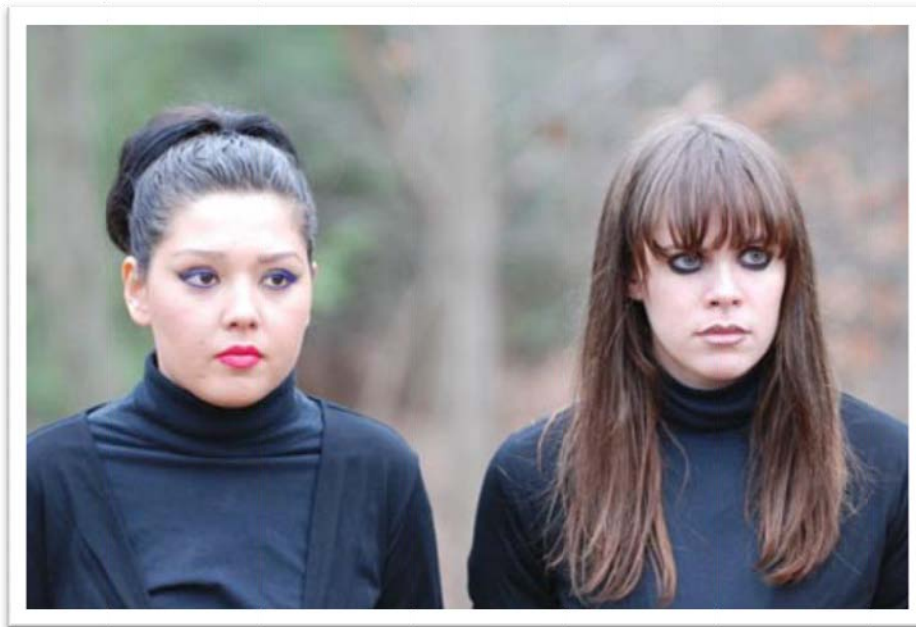
In a voice-over, the director tells us that this was neither the first nor the last time these events would take place. As he saw it, Raven wanted the girls to focus solely on her, and the girls simply saw it all as "tenderness." It's never revealed if Jessie and Raven had a sexual relationship before the filming of the documentary began or whether Raven was simply playing it up for the camera; nor do we learn whether or not Angel was ever seduced by Raven.



While this scene sounds as if it's exploitative, it's actually rather tame. The film doesn't play to the male gaze, either — the lesbian scene doesn't read as a means of titillating the male character. Sex is strongly implied rather than explicitly shown, and in fact the only person who ends up topless is the director himself. The surveillance-style camera angle renders the viewer a bit of a peeping tom, though, and I found the scene to be more unsettling than it is arousing.

Apparently these tenuous mental and physical connections are enough for Angel and Jessie to allow Raven to be the ringleader and to hang on her every word. To me, their devotion seems unlikely, and this was the biggest problem I had with the film.

Kamilla Sofie Sadekova ("Angel") & Jessica Palette ("Jessie")



Group dynamics among girls and women fascinate me. Often there's an alpha female among a group of friends — the leader of the pack. If the girls are school-age, she's the most popular. Generally, the alpha is a master manipulator who rules by fear, sometimes masked in a guise of concern.

Raven never particularly struck me as being charismatic enough to maintain such a hold over her friends. She's surly, controlling and at times verbally and physically abusive, but she never really balances out her cruelties with enough kindness to propel her into the role of a cult-like leader. All three girls have suffered their share of sexual abuse, and each is dealing with her own demons, but despite strong performances from Amato, Sadekova and Palette, the relationships didn't quite come off as truly symbiotic. In the end, Raven's real motives remain unclear.

That said, I'm all for films that explore the tangled dynamics among women, and *Under the Raven's Wing* was a pleasant enough surprise. There are horrific elements to the film, but it's not what you'd expect from your typical scary movie, particularly in the indie realm.

It would have benefited from some judicious editing, but *Raven's Wing* is certainly a strong directing debut from Susan Adriensen, who's carved out her own particular niche as an indie horror actress in films such as *The Blood Shed* and *Pink Eye*. Horror is a genre where women are vastly underrepresented, whether behind the camera or on-screen in powerful roles. Adriensen and company seem to be setting about to change all that, and I'll be waiting to see what they come up with next.