

# A HORROR MOVIE CALENDAR



HAL C. P.  
ASTELL

Kup Kake  
22



# *A Horror Movie Calendar*

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*A Horror Movie Calendar*

APOCALYPSE LATER FILM

*A Horror Movie Calendar*

*by*

HAL C. F. ASTELL

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## **DEDICATION**

To my much better half, Dee Astell, who watches everything I review with me and often curses me afterwards. All my holidays are for you and all my holidays are better with you in them.

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## INTRODUCTION

There's something about holidays that spurs the soul. And every time the human race conjures up a new day of celebration, whether to mark an important change in the year, to worship a particular deity or to simply create an excuse to have consumers like you and me buy more shit that we don't need, a horror filmmaker somewhere is likely to introduce a massacre to make it memorable.

That trend has held true for a long time, especially at Christmas, which I've never quite understood. Why are we so fundamentally drawn to make Christmas horror movies? Are all horror filmmakers traumatised by elves as much as they've persuaded us they're traumatised by clowns? I'm not sure, but we seem to get a dozen new Christmas horror movies each and every year.

However, while Christmas constantly threatens to swamp the horror calendar, a whole slew of other holidays are represented too and I've felt like exploring them for quite some time. So, during a single year\*, I made the dubious decision to celebrate every holiday I could by reviewing a horror movie that's set on it at Apocalypse Later, posting each review on the holiday in question.

What I found was that some holidays were really limited to one choice, so, rather inevitably, Mother's Day and Father's Day are each celebrated by, well, *Mother's Day* (1980) and *Father's Day* (2011). If there are any better choices out there, please drop me a line and let me know where I went horribly wrong!

However, there was often choice and, because everything that I do at Apocalypse Later is rooted in discovery, my plan was to attempt to avoid all the most obvious choices (because you already know about them) and also to include some surprising holidays too, all while skewering those pesky Hallmark moments every chance I got.

I did manage to successfully avoid choosing *Friday the 13th* (1980) for Friday the 13th, *April Fool's Day* (1986) for April Fools' Day and, especially,

*Halloween* (1978) for Hallowe'en, though I did end up mentioning it often, as one of the most pivotal holiday horror movies ever made.

However, for the latter, I chose a feature that's becoming more and more popular as each year passes and may well end up becoming just as obvious a choice, given time. It's *Trick 'r Treat* (2007), which should not be confused with *Trick or Treat* (1986), with genius casting of Gene Simmons as a rock DJ and Ozzy Osbourne as a TV evangelist. I covered that movie in *The Awesomely Awful '80s, Part 2*, so now you have no excuse not to buy that book as well.

Our western holiday calendar often looks like it's based on the Christian calendar, but the slightest digging shows us that those Christian holidays are often pagan holidays wearing new clothes. So I cover plenty of both, Easter and Christmas but also Walpurgisnacht and Samhain, along with Yom Kippur, Ghost Month and Cinco de Mayo.

Most of these films are American, as you might expect, though some are British and Canadian (or even Israeli and Malaysian). Again, if there are horror movies that are set on international holidays that I failed to find and so haven't covered, please let me know.

Some of these films are excellent and highly recommended, all the way up to the mother of all pagan horror movies, *The Wicker Man*, which builds up to a Beltane fire, and is certainly in the running for the best feature that the genre has ever produced. Some of these films, however, are not. Some are undeniably awful and I don't recommend them in the slightest, so I'm merely doing my job as your cinematic bodyguard by taking those bullets for you. Hilariously, *Evil Breed: The Legend of Samhain* can't even pronounce the holiday in its own title properly. Just in case, it's not Sam hain; it's Sahw 'un.

My own favourite holiday is Guy Fawkes Night, though I haven't been truly able to celebrate it since moving to the States. Fortunately, there's a British horror/sci-fi movie set on the Fifth of November, so I can relive it vicariously through the joys of *Attack the Block*. And yes, that is indeed a film to remember, remember.

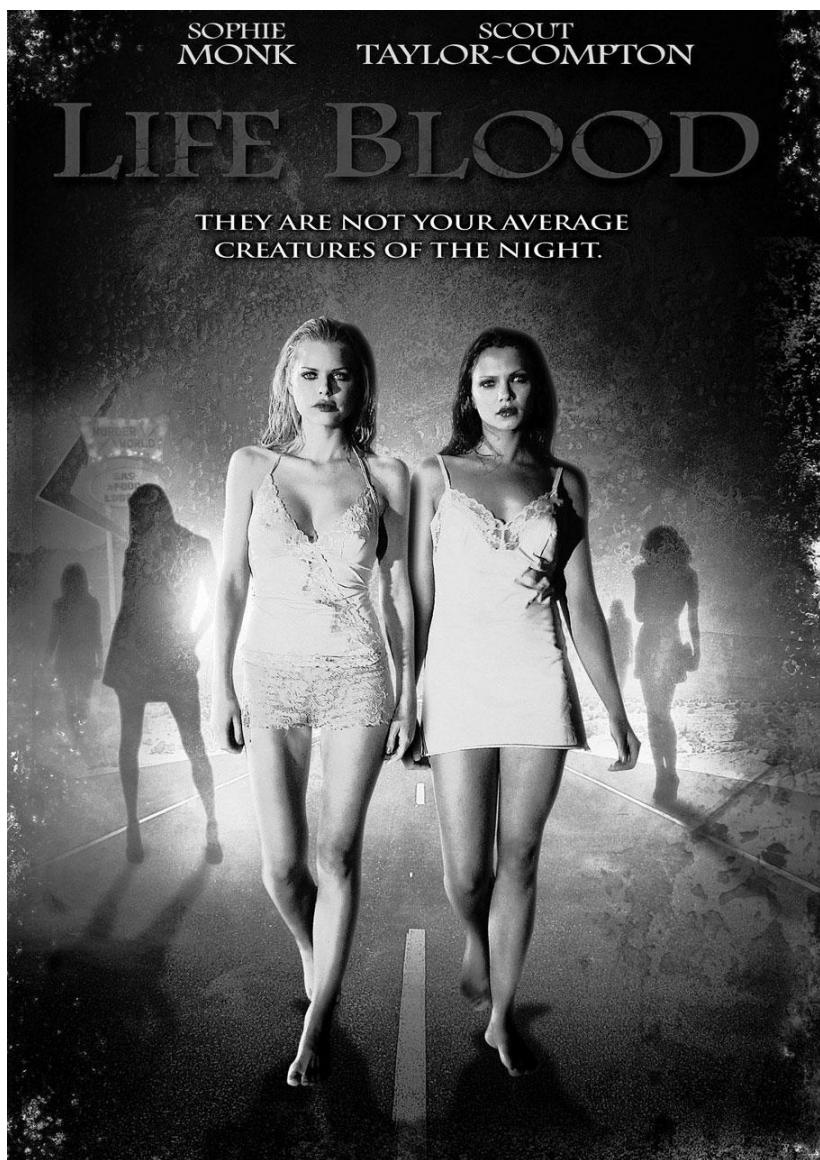
So, I hope I included your favourite holiday and I hope I didn't spoil it

by selecting something so outstandingly awful that you're going to track it down because I included it here, watch it and utterly hate it and probably me, forever destroying your enthusiasm for the holiday in question. I'll just point out that, if your favourite holiday is May Day, Hallowe'en or Guy Fawkes Night, you're safe.

— Hal C. F. Astell  
June 2021

\* Yeah, yeah, it didn't end up being a single year at all. Like that was ever going to happen? Let me blame filmmaker Eben McGarr, because he announced his Jewish holiday horror movie *Hannukah* just in time for me to notice it before publication and how could I publish this book without including that one? So, naturally, I had to wait for it to be completed and released.\*\*

\*\* Yeah, yeah, that's a complete lie. It's not Eben's fault. It just took me five years. Sue me.



## LIFE BLOOD (2009)

*New Year's Day*

Director: Ron Carlson

Writer: Ron Carlson

Stars: Sophie Monk and Anya Lahiri

So here's the first picture in this new project, because what better way can there be to celebrate New Year's Day than with a horror movie staple: a couple of lesbian vampires? In this instance, they're also both models and members of girl groups, which does kind of suggest the level of acting that's going to be on offer, but hey.

One is Sophie Monk, born in London but raised in Australia, where she made two albums with Bardot, created out of the *Popstars* reality TV show, who became the first Australian act to debut at number one for both their single and their album. She won *The Celebrity Apprentice Australia* in 2015 and served as a judge a year later on *Australia's Got Talent*. She plays Brooke Anchel here.

The other is Anya Lahiri, also born in London but of Indian and Finnish heritage. She represented the UK in the Eurovision Song Contest, singing with the band Precious, who also recorded two top ten singles. Recently, she's worked as a fitness instructor, working at Barry's Boot Camp on both sides of the Atlantic to train celebrities like Kim Kardashian and Natalie Imbruglia. She's Rhea Cohen in this film.

Both are well known as models, Monk in particular regularly appearing in the sort of lists of sexy women in Australia that lad rags like *FHM* and *Maxim* compile, for over a decade, which is impressive. Oh, and I bet you didn't expect page one of this book to mention Kim Kardashian! Frankly, neither did I.

Now, I can hear you wondering: what sort of horror movie is going to star a couple of ladies with these credentials? Well, you'll be right a little but wrong a lot, if you're anything like me, because Ron Carlson, who

wrote, produced and directed this picture, clearly didn't want to do what so many other exploitation filmmakers had previously done. I did have a whole slew of problems with this picture, but originality wasn't one of them. Carlson had some good ideas and he even managed to get some of them up onto the screen for us to see.

In fact, there are some sections here that I didn't just enjoy; I actively felt gratified that someone chose to put them in a film. Now, to be entirely fair, I'm not convinced that all those were due to great judgement on his part, as some may tie more to the presence of regular cast members who are always willing to act in his movies. I'm thinking that some clever ideas, like the casting of Danny Woodburn as a deputy sheriff, are a combination of both of these. He is very possibly the best actor here, but he's also only four feet tall and surely doesn't tend to expect to play someone in law enforcement. Don't they usually have height requirements?

The most obvious idea, however, revolves around the presence of God, or, at least, the character who's described as the "creator of the universe". In Carlson's world, that's a woman, played by the lovely Angela Lindvall, who emerges from a whirlwind of cloud to become the angel of death for Rhea's girlfriend. You see, Rhea is pure and honest, so God has plans for her; but her girlfriend, Brooke, isn't, so God disintegrates her on the spot.

As a red-blooded heterosexual male, I'm hardly going to complain about the visuals here, but I'm still not a hundred percent on the theology. Sure, purity and honesty do seem to be good subjects for God to talk about and I have no problems with the heretical approach of Him being a Her, but I'm really not sure how purity applies when we find ourselves staring at her boobs through a flimsy see-through blouse and she's busy kissing a lesbian on the lips. Aesthetically, I have no concerns; theologically, I think we're on rather shaky ground. Purity is something that ought to run a lot deeper than whether you murdered someone in the previous scene or not.

And here's where New Year comes in. We start out at a New Year's Eve party in 1968 (even though it says 1969; continuity is not this film's strong point), as Rhea and Brooke are making out in the bathroom. Topless girls dance to Donovan's *Mellow Yellow* and arrogant pricks attempt to convince



them into the sack. The most arrogant of these pricks is surely Warren James, apparently an important actor; I wonder if those names are taken from other notorious womanisers of the era, as I can think of a couple of good candidates. He's full of himself and guys watching should certainly not copy any of his pick-up lines. "Ladies, don't let me choose someone else; who's it gonna be?" is not charming, trust me. I may be as far from an expert as can be comfortably imagined but I know that much.

Fast forward until almost midnight and he has a mostly naked Carrie Lane asking him to "Please stop!" as she cowers in the corner. He sounds like Donald Trump in the famous video. "You may suffer some emotional damage," he suggests, as he places a bar of soap inside a sock, but, "Who would believe you?" That's when Brooke finds them, sees what's going on and, right as *Auld Lang Syne* begins, stabs him right in the throat with one of Carrie's hairpins. Eighty-seven times.

And that's why we promptly find Rhea and Brooke chasing down the empty Pearblossom Highway in the wee hours of New Year's Day like a pair of grindhouse heroines. That's why it feels ominous when other bad things happen, like the possum that comes out of nowhere to be crushed under the wheels. That's why Rhea insists that Brooke pull over because she doesn't want any more death. And that's why our scantily-clad God shows up in her own personal dust devil, gives Rhea a lingering kiss on the



lips to endow her with eternal life and explains how she's going to become an angel, tasked with destroying the wicked.

Being that pure and honest soul, Rhea asks God to bring Brooke back and She does, with the observation that, "She ultimately will be your true test." Into the desert soil they both go, to wake from glowing cocoons no less than forty years on as New Year's Day continues for them in 2009.

Again, I'm for this idea but wonder how their dresses are gone but their slips are not and their lipstick is pristine. What preservatives do they put in that stuff? And how does Rhea inherently know what year it is? They never told me in Sunday School that angels have an inherent grasp of the passage of time.

More than anything, when did angels apparently gain the traditional characteristics of vampires? I'm all for mash-ups of mythology but that's an odd one indeed! Rhea and Brooke also figure things out rather quickly, because, as one of the film's executive producers stops his pickup on the way to a bowling tournament in Vegas to see if these two half-naked girls seemingly stranded in the desert in the middle of the night need any help—what a gentleman!—Brooke quickly feels the urge to bite his throat out. And the hitch-hiker who shows up conveniently at the exact same time? Yeah, him too! That's when she finds her super-speed. And, once they get to the Murder World convenience store just as the sun's coming up, they



both realise that they should get in there quick and sharpish if they don't want to turn into crispy critters.

And so that's where they spend New Year's Day, with the blinds down and the drama threatening to take them down too. This time, I'm sure you're way ahead of me. The concept here is fine: what a great idea to lock us into a single location, thus enabling both a simple story and a reduced budget, but, honestly, who calls their convenience store Murder World?

I should add here that *Murder World* was a working title for the movie, even though it has no purpose except to be ironically appropriate given where the story takes us. Another working title was *Pearblossom*, to which the film does eventually return, and that's an evocative name that merely doesn't evoke the sort of story that we're actually watching.

I'll quit running through the synopsis here and introduce you to some of the many recognisable actors who join our story.

Who's that as the chauvinistic local lawman, Sheriff Tillman? Why, that's Charles Napier, in movie number a hundred and something for him but still not looking vastly different from the Russ Meyer movies he made forty years earlier, like *Cherry*, *Harry & Raquel* and *Supervixens*. His deputy, Felix Shoe, is Danny Woodburn, who is a revelation here, showing exactly why he deserves to be remembered for more than being Splinter in the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* reboot or Mickey on *Seinfeld*. Rounding out the police department is Jennifer Tung, a well experienced actress who's one of the least recognisable actors in this film, even if many are faces that we know that belong to names that we don't.

The biggest star today is probably Scout Taylor-Compton, who portrays Carrie Lane as a very believable rape victim; it isn't a major part for her, at least compared to that of Lita Ford in *The Runaways* or Laurie Strode in Rob Zombie's *Halloween* remakes, but she does a good job with it. Of course, she ends up with her name above the title on the DVD cover but that's just misleading marketing making the world go round.

At points, watching this picture became a game of, "Where do I know him from?" I've lost track of how many times I've seen Iranian-born actor Marshall Manesh, both on TV and in movies, though I've probably never

referenced his name until now. He's one of those character actors who are always reliable, whatever the quality of the material they're given to work with. Here, he's married to Gina Gallego, who's also guested on every TV show known to mankind. They're a couple who stop off at Murder World—oh, that name!—and thus end up trapped in our story. Even the young man arguing with his girlfriend in the middle of the desert at the end of the film is someone I know from a short film called *Black Gulch*, shot here in Arizona back in 2003, which I've screened as part of a few Apocalypse Later Roadshow sets. He was Stephen Taylor back then, while he's Stephen Monroe-Taylor now, but he's yet another recognisable face.

The exception to prove the rule is Patrick Renna, who is really the male lead, as Dan the clerk at Murder World—I so want to see the commercials for this place! He's not inexperienced, but I don't believe I've seen any of his movies and only a couple, like *Poor White Trash* and *Dorm Daze* ring any bells for me.

Now, you probably figured out some of where we were going a whole page ago, right? Rhea is our heroine and Brooke is our villain. And if you see that as a spoiler, you should avoid reading the back cover blurbs of DVDs because you're going to be frequently and sorely disappointed.

The value here really doesn't come from the leads, because they're far from the greatest actors in the world, probably not even at Murder World—hey, is that trademarked, by the way?—and certainly not in this movie. They're surely here because they have substantial fan bases, and for more reasons than because Sophie Monk has fantastic breasts and Anya Lahiri has magnificent eyes. I have to say that I much preferred the acting of the latter in this picture; she really tried and managed to carry much of her part, exuding both sex appeal and the innocence that prompted God to put her to work. By comparison, Monk's take on Brooke comes across as annoying, which I don't think was what Carlson was going for. Evil? Sure. Seductively twisted? Absolutely. But annoying? I don't see why he'd go for that. I didn't need much reason to stay on Rhea's side but that helped.

Of all things, I left this lesbian vampire movie thinking that Carlson had created a rather refreshing police department. It isn't just the actors he

cast to build this team or the dynamics of pairing a politically incorrect old John Wayne wannabe with a little person for a deputy and a Chinese American lady for an officer. It's in the sheer routine of their work, even when dealing with an unusual crime. Deputy Shoe, in particular, finds that he must spend his New Year out in the blazing sun directing Pearblossom Highway traffic around the crime scene which we watched Brooke create in the wee hours. I remember Danny Woodburn from comedic roles or in minor parts in pictures like *Bad Ass* or *Watchmen* but it was fantastic to see him in something more substantial, especially playing a character whose size is never once brought up. He's great running through police routine out on the road and he's even better when he finally ends up at Murder World—let's come up with a jingle for this place, readers! No, the police department isn't the core of this film but they're arguably its grounding.

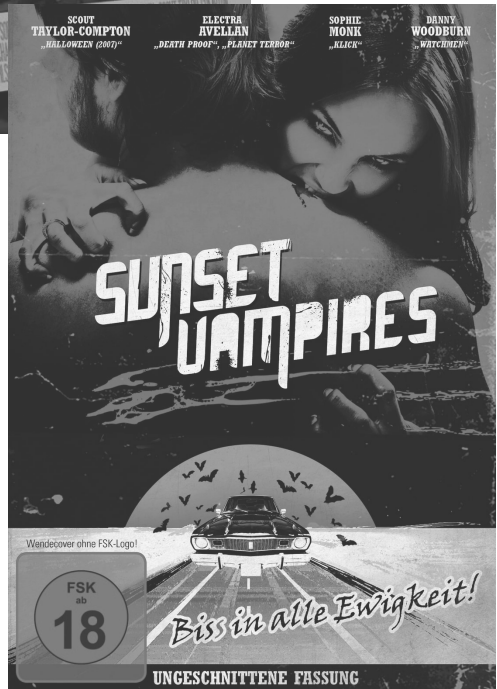
So there's *Life Blood*, a horror movie set mostly on New Year's Day. Its leading ladies, Rhea and Brooke, are ended with the old year to begin the new one as something different, albeit forty years later, which is kind of the point of New Year, if you think about it. It's a confused picture and one with enough that doesn't make sense that it won't take eagle-eyed goof trackers to construct mental lists to laugh at later. However, it does aim for a rather different take on a lot of things: God, angels and of course, the exploitation sub-genre of lesbian vampires.



I enjoyed it, not just for the glimpse of God's boobies, and even though I mentally threw my hands up in despair on a number of occasions. What should you never name a convenience store in the middle of the desert? All together now! Murder World! You also don't leave the door unlockable just because you never close. At times I felt that Ron Carlson, the director, should have slapped Ron Carlson, the writer, but I'm not sure how that could work. This isn't a good film but it does try and it's a good way to kick off a new year and a new project together. Having fun yet? Well, we have 364 more days to go!



A Horror Movie Calendar



**YOU HAVE NOTHING TO FEAR  
UNTIL THEY OPERATE!**



The CANNON GROUP INC. Presents **BARBI BENTON** in a GOLLAN-GLOBUS Production of a BOAZ DAVIDSON Film  
**HOSPITAL MASSACRE** Also starring **CHIP LUCA JON VAN NESS JOHN WARNER WILLIAMS DEN SURLS**  
Music Composed & Conducted by **ARLON OBER** Screenplay by **MARG BEHM** From a story by **BOAZ DAVIDSON**  
Associate Producers **CHRISTOPHER PEARCE & JOHN THOMPSON** Director of Photography **NICHOLAS STERNBERG**  
Produced by **MENAHEM GOLAN & YORAM GLOBUS** Directed by **BOAZ DAVIDSON**





## HOSPITAL MASSACRE (1981)

*Valentine's Day*

Director: Boaz Davidson

Writers: Marc Behm, from a story by Boaz Davidson

Stars: Barbi Benton, Chip Lucia, Jon Van Ness, Den Surles, Gay Austin, John Warner Williams and Lanny Duncan

With *My Bloody Valentine* being far too obvious a Valentine's Day pick for my Horror Movie Calendar, in either its original or remake versions, I took a wander around the interwebs and found this feature, which begins on Valentine's Day and which is flavoured by it throughout.

It was shot as *X-Ray* but released as *Hospital Massacre*, which is a much more salacious title. However, while the original isn't exactly a name to reach out and grab us by the wallet, this new choice has the unfortunate side effect of pigeonholing the movie into the slasher genre, which almost everybody seems to believe this is. I thought so too for perhaps half the running time, but I gradually discarded that idea because, quite frankly, the film makes precisely no sense as a slasher. Now, it is well within the bounds of possibility that director Boaz Davidson, who wrote the original story which Marc Behm adapted into a screenplay, is completely inept and had no conception of how utterly ridiculous this really is, but I don't buy that and I have a theory that allows everything we see to make complete sense. So settle down, boys and girls, and let me explain.

Initially, it does follow the slasher template, right down to the flashback prologue that takes place in 1961. We're at Susan Jeremy's house and she's inside playing with a train set and a friend called David. Another boy leaves a Valentine's card at her front door, knocks to get her attention, then runs back to the window to watch her open it. Unfortunately for him, it doesn't go remotely well. "From Harold?" David cries. "Oh my God!" Susan adds. He screws it up and discards it as they laugh. So, during the brief time she leaves the room to cut a couple of slices of cake, Harold

apparently sneaks in through the window, lifts David up high and impales him on a hatstand which stubbornly refuses to tip over, even with a ten year old corpse throwing it off balance. Little Susan screams and we leap forward nineteen years to 1980. Susan is all grown up now and looking rather professional in her red business suit. She has a daughter called Eva and a bitter ex-husband named Tom, but she's off to hospital with her new beau, Jack, to get some test results.

So far, so good for a slasher movie, though we're given zero additional information here to help us along. We don't know what the police thought about David's gruesome demise, because we never see any. We don't know that Harold was arrested and locked away in a psych ward like Michael Myers. We don't know if he continued to obsess over Susan, his only true love. We don't really know much at all, just that Susan grew up and has to get some test results.

And here's where I'm going to depart from conventional wisdom and call a different tune. I don't believe that Susan and Tom are divorced and I don't believe that Jack exists. However, I do believe that it's Tom who will drop his wife off at the hospital, before taking Eva home. I do believe that Susan is going to stress out about how scary her test results are going to be. And I do believe that she worries herself so much that her mind then descends into a Kafka-esque nightmare of weird intensity that dredges up the suppressed trauma of David's death. Keep all that in mind and this will make a lot more sense.

The little disconnections from reality start right as they arrive at the hospital. Jack stops in the no parking zone and, because Susan tells him that it'll only take a couple of minutes, he waits for her there. He suddenly realises, totally out of the blue, that this was the hospital where some maniac ran amok the previous year. "Oh, please!" replies Susan. And into the hospital she goes to ask for Dr. Jacobs' office, the doctor she's been seeing for a few years now. The man with a mop drums his fingers in a notably creepy fashion, while overtly leering at Susan. Inside the elevator is a fresh corpse, propped against the wall, bleeding on her pristine white shoes. Ah no, that's a sleepy man and his burger. He wishes her a Happy

Valentine's Day as he leaves. A trio of workers in gas masks and short sleeved shirts are supposedly fumigating the ninth floor, but they're just hanging around the elevator to tell her she's gone a stop too far. Then someone pulls a switch and stops the elevator. All this in a few minutes, remember? Time never flows at the standard rate in our dreams.

While Susan is stuck in the lift, Dr. Jacobs is called up to the ninth floor for no apparent reason and with no apparent destination. It has to be said that she looks very young and very nervous, but perhaps that's merely due to there being nobody to be found anywhere on the ninth floor, as even the fumigators have disappeared. And we, way up here in the cheap seats, can't fail to pose a barrage of questions.

For a start, I get that Jacobs walks up the stairs because the elevator isn't responsive but, when she steps out of the stairwell and into a dark and hazy floor that's clearly not being used, why doesn't she assume this is a prank and walk right back down again? Does this junior hospital doctor have nothing better to do with her time than wander around a disused hospital floor in the dark wondering why she's there? Why does she walk tentatively into a random room and then close the door behind her? Why does she pull back a sheet to expose a corpse? And why does she wander over to a locker to get stabbed to death by the inevitable maniac dressed in scrubs?



None of this makes sense. It might make a little sense if only she was a college student trying to grab the last few items for the scavenger hunt that might get her into a sorority in a slasher movie, but it makes no sense in this context. The only other way that it makes sense is if it's the product of Susan's nightmare. This sort of thing goes on and on.

That creepy janitor from earlier discovers Dr. Jacobs hanging upside down in a locker, for no believable reason at all. When he tells the doctor hovering outside, he runs away and the janitor chases him into a room, somehow loses him and then stands around waiting for the maniacal killer to materialise out of nowhere and thrust his face into a sink full of acid that's located conveniently nearby. Does anything here make sense at all? I should add that Susan's fiancé, Jack, is still parked in the no parking zone right in front of the hospital. Nobody has told him to move. Nobody has given him a ticket. He doesn't wonder why Susan's taking so long. And it's so quiet that he even falls asleep.

The only thing that makes any sense is that, amidst the creepy doctors, creepy nurses and creepy patients in this hospital, Susan finds one helpful soul to try to lever her out of the bureaucratic nightmare in which she finds herself mired. And his name is Harry.

It isn't remotely possible that anyone can fail to figure out the killer in this movie; it's about as transparent as figuring out who will murder his



way through the cast list in a *Friday the 13th* sequel. Yet, the introduction of friendly intern Harry doesn't stop everyone else in this hospital from acting creepy. In one notorious scene, Dr. Dan Saxon submits Susan, who he requires to strip down to her panties, to an utterly awkward physical examination. In slow motion. We saw her X-rays too, though they looked more like a gorgon than an actual human body, and they weren't of her feet. Or her throat. Or her thighs. Dr. Beam isn't any better and Nurses Dora and Kitty are there to enforce not to nurse. And these are just the employees! Just wait until you meet the patients!

There has to come a point where enough is enough. If we stubbornly persist in reading this as a straightforward slasher, it's going to really suck. Sure, the score is impressive, full of choral weirdness and orchestral strains, courtesy of composer Arlon Ober, who had conducted the London Philharmonic Orchestra, but the rest fails any test you throw at it. The acting ranges from vaguely capable to pretty dismal. The cinematography is nothing to write home about. The editing seems off, with a few shots stubbornly refusing to end. The deaths are reasonably plentiful, at least, and the effects decent; one in particular took me by surprise, which is a strong compliment. But the script makes less and less sense as time goes by and the levels of surreality keep on increasing. Nobody seems willing to tell Susan what's wrong with her, but they dump her into a ward anyway with three old women who rant and rave like a lunatic Greek chorus. I was honestly wondering at this point if she had found her way into a mental hospital by mistake.

Beyond the score, there are only two things that work here. One is the performance of Barbi Benton as Susan Jeremy, which is surprising because she was never the greatest actor in the world, as decorative as she is in films like *Deathstalker* or every third episode of *Fantasy Island*. While she was more versatile than most expect, with a string of repeat TV roles and a brief career as a country singer (*Brass Buckles* reached #5 on the country chart in 1975), she was still primarily known in 1981 for her modelling career that had led her to the Playboy mansion. She met Hugh Hefner at the age of eighteen and he asked her out; when she replied that she'd

never dated anyone over 24 before, the 42 year old mogul quipped, “That’s all right, neither have I.” They lived together for seven years and, during that time, she graced the cover of *Playboy* three times and “photo-essays” inside twice more. Even though it didn’t seem likely, she does everything here that she needs to do and she successfully sells the nightmare that she finds herself trapped in.

The other success is that surrealistic nightmare. Halfway through the film, I seriously stopped watching it as a slasher. I quit throwing my hands up in disdain at how ridiculous each scene continued to be. I gave up bitching internally about how empty this hospital is, even when nurses whom we’ve never seen before are suddenly murdered in wild and wacky ways, like the one where the killer walks down a typically dark hallway with a sheet held out in front of him and his mobile light source. Instead I settled back and let the surreality wash over me. Watching this as a stress-driven, PTSD-fuelled nightmare doesn’t merely make sense; it also ups the creep factor substantially. After she wakes up in the ward to find a horrific gift by her bedside, she runs off to open the first door she finds, exposing three people in full body casts, flailing around like lunatics. That image is fleeting and utterly irrelevant to the story, but it’s glorious and it’ll stay with me.

There are other images that will stay with me too. At one point, Susan is kept waiting in Dr. Saxon’s office and her eyes eventually wander to the pictures of wounds framed and hanging on his walls; I couldn’t help but remember how Will Graham told Dr. Hannibal Lecktor how he knew he was the killer he sought. There’s a patient with the same name as me, who looks rather like an intoxicated Quentin Tarantino; he crops up at points throughout the movie and always adds a little edge. A number of notable scenes involve privacy screens, almost like a fetish, and one in particular stands out for its nightmarish quality, the killer inviting Jack to “come closer” to see what is presumably his supposed fiancée collapsed within a wheelchair behind one of those kinky privacy screens, all through a set of creepy whispers. As I write this, I feel I should set a reminder six months out for me to re-read this review and see which images leap right back to

front and centre and which have faded over time, because at this point, I'm interested to see how that comes out.

And so, this was utterly not what I expected. Yes, it's a great movie for Valentine's Day, with a snubbed young psychopath maybe re-discovering his crush a couple of decades later and murdering his way towards her; if he can't win her metaphorical heart, he'll just have settle for the physical thing, right? It's also appropriate that a Valentine's Day movie be set in a hospital, because a whole slew of traditions surrounding St. Valentine, the Christian martyr from the third century, tie to medical issues.

When imprisoned for ministering to persecuted Christians, he restored the sight of his jailer's blind daughter, which was pretty good of him, even if he sent the very first Valentine's card to her afterwards, because that rather calls his motives into question. Also, while Italians gift their lovers with St. Valentine's Keys, as an "invitation to unlock the giver's heart", they also gift them to children to ward off epilepsy, which is also known as St. Valentine's Malady.

Anyway, this isn't a slasher movie, it's a trip into the subconscious of a young lady with trauma in her past and stress in her present about the possibility of bad news in her future. It's a consistently wild nightmare of a movie, weird and wonderful and worthier of comparison to pictures like *Possession* than films like *Halloween*. Barbi Benton is the lead the film needs



and the sight of her half naked is always welcome; bizarrely, there wasn't much of that on *Fantasy Island*. The filmography of Boaz Davidson may not be particularly impressive in any way other than picture count, but this deserves to be remembered along with *The Last American Virgin* and the Israeli movies, such as *Mishpachat Tzan'ani*, which provide his best IMDb ratings. It's just not a slasher movie, folks.







**LET FREEDOM BLEED**

**PRESIDENTS DAY**

Crooked Jaw Productions A Film By David Zuckerman 'President's Day' Monica Ricketts David Zuckerman Jud Zumwalt  
Brittany Rosoff Chelsea Leech Dax Hill Benjamin Goodwin with Michael Minto and Mike Ostroski Executive Produced By  
John Zumwalt Produced By Benjamin Goodwin David Zuckerman Jud Zumwalt Jordan Leach cinematography by  
James Martinez written by Benjamin Goodwin David Zuckerman and Jud Zumwalt directed By David Zuckerman

**COMING SOON**

**R** THIS FILM IS NOT YET RATED

## PRESIDENTS DAY (2016)

### *Presidents Day*

Director: David Zuckerman

Writers: Benjamin Goodwin, David Zuckerman and Jud Zumwalt

Stars: Monica Ricketts, David Zuckerman, Jud Zumwalt, Brittany Faith Rosoff, Chelsea Taylor Leech, Dax Hill, Benjamin Goodwin, Mike Ostroski and Michael Minto

There are a lot of movies that look like they'd be great choices for the third Monday in February, but the list whittles itself down in no time flat.

For example, I was planning to review *President's Day*, a 2010 movie with a tiny \$5,000 budget that was made by 25 year old Chris LaMartina, surely best known now for *Call Girl of Cthulhu*, which lots of people seem to be watching on Netflix. However, while it did feature a mysterious murderer dressed up as Honest Abe, slashing his way through all the candidates for Student Council President at Lincoln High (home of the Lincoln Lambs), it turned out to have precisely nothing to do with the actual holiday known as President's Day in eight states of the union, so it doesn't count. Now, I did want it to count, just so that I could introduce you to Eddie Mills, who thinks that being Student Council President would look great on his Naval Academy application. His pitch? "At Lincoln, everyone deserves a shot." That's glorious and, with a line like that, I really don't want to look at any other possibilities. But, *sassinfrassin*, this is a holiday horror book, so I had to move on.

Fortunately, this picture came along to help me out, and it's absolutely set on what's known as Presidents Day in another three American states. That's Presidents Day without any punctuation, unlike the President's Day mentioned above, which features an apostrophe before the final S, or indeed Presidents' Day, with the apostrophe after the final S, which is how the holiday is known in ten states, making it the most popular spelling. Oh, and that wandering apostrophe is just the beginning of the rabbit hole

that was originally known as Washington's Birthday, by which name it's still known in six more states. Washington was born on 22nd February, 1732, even though it was actually 11th February, 1731 at the time, because, while we think of George Washington as a famous American, he was born in the colonies of the British Empire, which was still happy with the Julian calendar at that point. The British Empire switched over to the Gregorian calendar in 1752 and most people alive at the time, Washington included, began to start celebrating according to that instead.

Now, if you're following all this carefully, we've still only covered 27 states, though one of those is Puerto Rico, which isn't a state at all; it's an "unincorporated territory", so we actually have a heck of a lot more states to go. Between them, there are no less than fourteen different names for this holiday, which became consolidated on the third Monday in February as recently as 1971 under the Uniform Monday Holiday Act.

Five states celebrate Abraham Lincoln too, because he was born on 12th February, 1809, including mine. Arizona's version is rather clumsily called Lincoln/Washington/President's Day. To avoid that clumsiness, Montana went with Lincoln's and Washington's Birthday, which is notably different to Minnesota, which celebrates Washington's and Lincoln's Birthday. Has anyone written a thesis about those priorities? Alabama ditches Lincoln entirely to have a George Washington/Thomas Jefferson Birthday, even though the latter was born in April, while Arkansas's version is George Washington's Birthday and Daisy Bates Day, though the latter wasn't ever elected to be president of anything except the Arkansas Conference of the NAACP. She was a civil rights activist.

Just to make it even more confusing, some states don't even bother with the whole February thing at all. New Mexico's Presidents' Day is held on the Friday after Thanksgiving, which everyone else calls Black Friday except for Indiana, where it's called Lincoln's Birthday, even though, if you recall, Lincoln was born in February. Then again, Indiana celebrates Washington's Birthday on Christmas Eve, because February apparently sucks. Georgia had Washington's Birthday on Christmas Eve too, at least until 2018, an extra quirk there being that it isn't even a state holiday.

All this highlights, of course, how much in flux this holiday is, meaning that, while most Americans do enjoy their day off on the third Monday of February, they have that particular day for a variety of different reasons. It's all about George Washington, unless it's about Abraham Lincoln too, or maybe Thomas Jefferson or even Daisy Bates, or perhaps all the presidents at once, not forgetting William Henry Harrison, who died only 31 days into his term.

Fortunately, this film has us covered whichever state we're watching from, because it doesn't just feature a single slasher in a Lincoln mask, it features a whole swathe of undead killer presidents, including Harrison. If I counted correctly, there are sixteen of them listed in the credits, with three actors doubling up to play a couple each. The earliest is Washington and the most recent Nixon, given that undead Lincoln couldn't afford the SAG rates needed to include Reagan. Yes, that's a joke in the actual film, because this is surely the wackiest look back at history since *Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure*.

In fact, it's very self-aware and the filmmakers sold me on the project with their very first gag. It all kicks off like a found footage movie, with Clarence filming Lilly and Lilly hating him doing it. Then his battery dies and that's it for the handheld angle. "Good," says Lilly. "It would have been super annoying if you'd have been filming us all weekend." Sadly,



we're then introduced to a dork in a yellow tank and a man bun, who goes by Brett, even though he's clearly attempting to be Ace Ventura but more annoying.

I couldn't figure out if Jud Zumwalt was aiming for Brett to be a surfer dude, a stoner dude, a gay dude or a slacker dude. Maybe he was trying to be all the above and yet still somehow ended up as a dumb jock. Certainly, within ten seconds of meeting Brett, I'd chalked him in for the first death. I wanted it to be exquisitely slow and painful. And soon. He's hardly the only annoying character, because there's also Ruttigger, whose name isn't really Ruttigger at all but Wellington, because Brett's both a moron and a bully. Wellington is a stereotypical nerd, there to write Brett's American History paper. They're two of seven characters we meet at the beginning of the film and the intros end with the leading lady, Lilly, pronouncing, "If everyone's done establishing themselves now, we should go."

Just for reference and in opening credits order, they're Lilly, the normal lead; Jake, a cool but oversensitive biker; Brett, the annoying one; Ashley, Brett's unappreciated horny girlfriend; Max, Brett's goth sister; Clarence, the token black guy; and "Ruttigger", the abused nerd help.

So off they all depart into a whole succession of horror movie clichés, starting with Brett's uncle Frank's old hunting cabin. The biggest problem this movie has is that it's all cliché, but the biggest success it has is that it



absolutely knows it and it goes there deliberately, with each one of these characters a deliberate stereotype overplayed for effect. It isn't remotely as commercial a knowing dig at horror film logic as *Scary Movie*, let alone *Scream*, but that's its greatest selling point. You really don't need millions of dollars to point out the stupidity of the genre, you just need insight and enough of a knack with dialogue to have characters say what we in the cheap seats are thinking. For instance, they pause at a toll booth that's no more believable than the one in *Blazing Saddles* so that a spooky toll booth dude can be ominous. "Ain't nothing fun about Presidents Day," he rants. "I've seen some shit, shit only your nightmares can comprehend." By the time he reaches "It could be the last day of your life", a voice from the back of the car pipes up, "Why are we not driving away?"

He also throws a mysterious book into the back of the car, so that, while these stereotypes fail to spark any emotional connections and Jake can emote over how he still hasn't got over Lilly dumping him for someone more mature—in the first grade—Maxine can recite a bunch of esoteric gibberish from the book so that the surprisingly limber corpse of Abraham Lincoln can rise from his grave outside, complete with stovepipe hat and axe. Suddenly, dead presidents are everywhere and nobody's any richer.

Cleverly, while nothing makes sense at all, Max points out that she can explain this "perfect MacGuffin" of a book and she's about to as Lincoln bursts in through the door of the cabin and skewers her to the wall with a hurled American flag, complete with pole. Wellington may well doubt the plausibility of what's starting to happen, but it really spices up the film and gets it moving. We're twenty-five minutes in with our first death scene now behind us and we're totally ready for the sheer onslaught of historical jokes that are, quite frankly, the best thing about the film.

Sure, the horror movie jokes are still fun, such as Clarence being pissed when his survival odds turn out to be precisely as established Hollywood racism suggested all along or Ashley running outside and continually losing clothing to the foliage. "Come on!" she hurls at the sky. "That didn't even make any sense!" But the best ones are historical in nature, whether it's FDR failing to give chase in the woods because they're not wheelchair

accessible or his namesake, Teddy Roosevelt, mounting the hunt instead. Ashley cleverly gets away from him by crossing running water. “A canal!” he cries. “My greatest foe!”

Some of these jokes are cheap, like George Washington mimicking Jack Nicholson’s famous door routine from *The Shining*. Some are obscure, like William Henry Taft’s portly frame having him stuck in the bathtub for the entire movie; there’s irony in him wanting a snort of Brett’s drugs given that he was the Attorney General but it’s an irony that has to be explained on screen. Every member of the audience is surely going to know a heck of a lot more about American history than Brett, even if they’re permanent residents like me rather than citizens, but most might learn something.

For instance, who would have conjured up the solution Ashley finally figures out, which is to look into the bathroom mirror and say “sic semper tyrannis” three times to manifest John Wilkes Booth? Just in case, that means “ever thus to tyrants” and it’s the line that Booth uttered when he assassinated Lincoln in the Ford Theater. And who got both meanings of his “break a leg” comment? He wasn’t merely an actor, for whom that’s a standard phrase; he also jumped onto the stage after shooting Lincoln and actually broke his leg.

This sort of detail is everywhere here, so much so that I’m sure that I, as a Brit, didn’t catch all of it. I adored the running joke that has James K. Polk feeling unappreciated by his fellow presidents but I’m sure there’s a more specific meaning buried in there that eluded me. I didn’t realise why John Adams and Thomas Jefferson were feuding friends until I looked that up after the movie ended. Not everything is as obvious as JFK wielding a baseball bat signed by Joe DiMaggio.

It’s bizarre to realise that this puerile, moronic, sophomoric movie is often also full of astute wit. In fact, it wouldn’t be too unfair to compare this to *Monty Python’s Life of Brian*. No, it isn’t remotely in the same league, but both these pictures take a look at history and our understanding of and interaction with it in surprisingly incisive fashion. Both meta scripts overshadow the obvious lack of budgets and production values, with the costumes cheap and the props cheaper. The actors are all deliberately



over the top, epitomising a stereotype each. Perhaps most overtly, both pictures actually get funnier the more we see them. Sure, I cringe a little every time I throw this one on, and it's a special character indeed that's more annoying than Brett, but by the half hour mark, my eyes are bright and I'm laughing aloud, not just at the jokes but at the anticipation of them as I suddenly remember what's coming next. In fact, knowing what's coming next actually helps for a change and spoilers become incentives to keep watching. Oh yeah, we're coming up to *that* bit!

And that makes me all the more surprised when I realise how little else these folk have done. I don't know what budget they had to work with, if indeed they even had one, but whatever it was clearly wasn't much at all, as evidenced by the fact that the cast are generally the crew.

The writers, for example, were Benjamin Goodwin, David Zuckerman and Jud Zumwalt. They also play Wellington, Jake and Brett respectively, three major roles. All three were producers, and Zumwalt the executive producer. Goodwin also served as the unit production manager and Zuckerman as both the editor and director, as well as a contributor to the film's visual effects.

Costuming was the domain of Chelsea Taylor Leech, who also played Maxine, while the casting was done by Michael Minto, who played John Wilkes Booth. Assistant director Jordan Leach, the remaining producer,

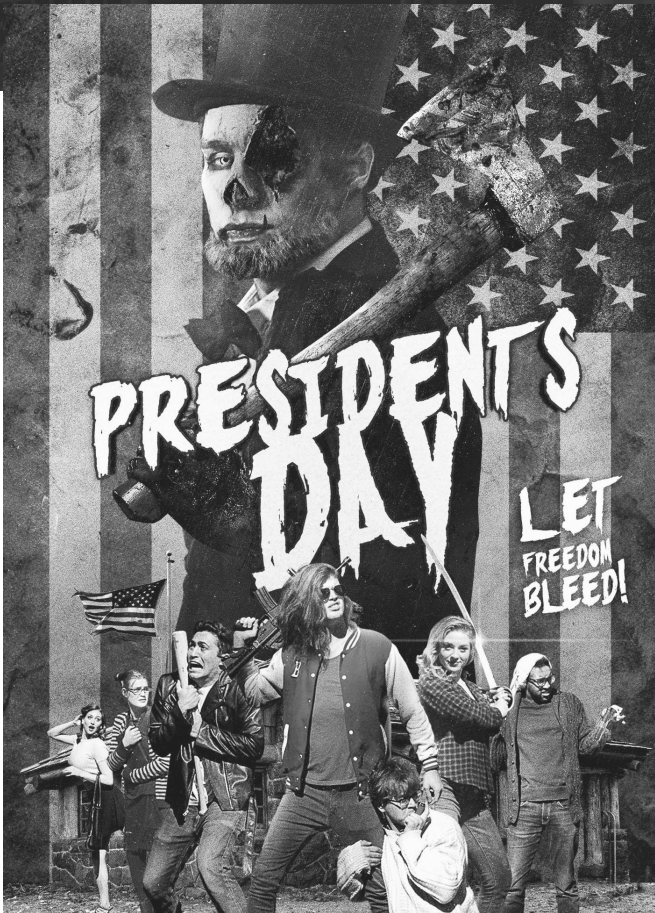


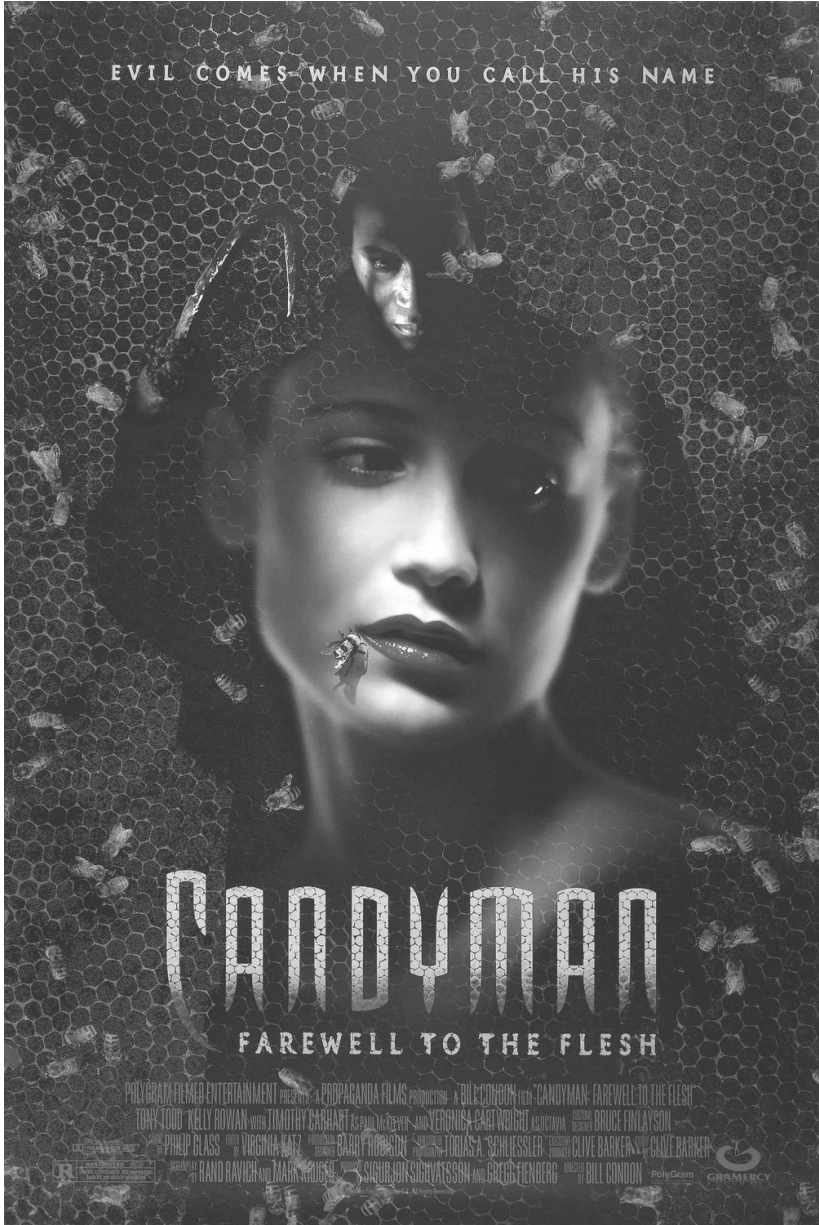
played both Abraham Lincoln and Andrew Jackson. Clearly there weren't a lot of people traipsing around Idyllwild Park, outside of Los Angeles, making this movie, but they got the job done.

And yet Zuckerman has only directed one other feature, *The Vigilante*, also released in 2016. Zumwalt's most prolific credits are as production assistants on Hollywood features as truly edgy and outrageous as *Veronica Mars: The Movie* and *Muppets Most Wanted*. Except for this, Goodwin has only been involved in short films. The biggest name involved is likely to be Mike Ostroski, James K. Polk here, who you've probably seen on television even if you don't realise it, which you probably don't.

I'm rather shocked that writers this imaginative who were able to finish this feature film, make it funny and get it distributed, haven't gone on to complete another one and another and another. I truly hope that they've been contacted by people who have seen this movie, almost as much as I hope that those people are schoolkids who had trouble with American history but saw this and learned enough to pass an exam like the one Brett was doomed to fail. The icing on the cake would be if they explained that to their teachers. "Everyone knows that William Henry Taft was Attorney General! That's why the drugs joke in *Presidents Day* (2016)!" Hey, stranger things have happened!







## CANDYMAN: FAREWELL TO THE FLESH (1995)

*Mardi Gras*

Director: Bill Condon

Writers: Rand Ravich and Mark Kruger, from a story by Clive Barker

Stars: Tony Todd, Kelly Rowan, William O'Leary, Bill Nunn, Matt Clark, David Gianopoulos, Fay Hauser, Joshua Gibran Mayweather, Michael Cuklin, Timothy Carhart and Veronica Cartwright

Cheesy title or not, the original *Candyman* was one of the underrated horror gems of the nineties. I've seen it a couple of times but I watched it again before reviewing this, its first of two sequels, on Mardi Gras, the day on which the finalé of *Farewell to the Flesh* is set, and it surprised me again for a whole slew of reasons.

Some were little ones, like Virginia Madsen being credited above Tony Todd, who was, after all, the monster of the franchise; the brief presence of Ted Raimi, brother of Sam; or the fact that the score was by a major modern composer, Philip Glass.

Others were more important, such as the way in which it's really an African American horror film that speaks without stereotype. Four of the six leads are actors of colour, though the focus is on a white woman; that leaves only one white male, who's by far the weakest of that half dozen, being a college professor who's cheating on his wife with a bimbo student. Xander Berkeley played him well, but this isn't ever about Prof. Lyle; it's about racial inequality and how things haven't changed much in a century or so. This came out in 1995 and it suddenly seems acutely topical.

This sequel isn't remotely up to the quality of its predecessor, but it's better than many have given it credit for; unfortunately, when it's bad, it's really bad and that particular lack of consistency really doesn't help. A great example of this comes during the prologue, right before the title card, as the Candyman shows up in the bathroom of a New Orleans bar.

Before I explain this scene, let me explain who the Candyman is. He's Daniel Robitaille, the son of a slave who grew up after the American Civil War in polite society because his father innovated a production technique in the shoe industry that proved to be highly profitable. Daniel became a renowned portrait artist, but made the mistake of falling in love with, and fathering a child with, a white woman. Being 1890, his lover's father led a lynch mob that severed his painting hand and replaced it with a hook, then smeared him with honey in order to attract bees to sting him to death. For reasons that are left unexplained until this sequel, his soul can be summoned by speaking the name Candyman into a mirror five times, whereupon Bad Things happen.

That background does more than neatly set up an urban legend in African American cloth. It illustrates an act of cruelty so utterly horrific that it underpins a horror franchise, but in a way that echoes down the decades. The lynch mob isn't merely killing Daniel, it's enforcing to him that he's less of a human being than they are. Sure, he can live among white folk and he can even paint them, but he's not one of them, for no better reason than he's black, and that inequality is mirrored in what we see in the contemporary scenes.

So, as we begin this sequel, we absolutely expect the Candyman to show up mysteriously when he's unwisely summoned and we fully expect that he'll gut that idiot with his hook hand. What we don't expect is the red herring we get before he appears out of thin air: the lights start to flicker, our victim looks around in fear and then we watch, shot from behind, a black man standing up in one of the stalls. Yes, the sequel to arguably the most racially aware horror film of the modern age (at least until Jordan Peele) sets up its first scare by suggesting that all black men look alike.

Maybe the scriptwriters, Rand Ravich and Mark Kruger, who worked from a story written by the creator of *Candyman*, acclaimed horror author Clive Barker, thought it might be acceptable because this first victim is the single most annoying white dude from the first movie. Dr. Phillip Purcell, who's an arrogant expert on urban legends, provided a voice of reason when Helen Lyle, a graduate student researching the Candyman, opines

that he's real. However, Michael Cuklin played him as a man who always knows that he knows more than everyone around him, like a Stephen Fry shorn of all humility. We can believe Fry reciting Candyman's name into a mirror five times just to prove he doesn't exist, but we wouldn't want to punch him in the face and rip off his ponytail, which we surely want to do to Purcell.

He's the only character to return here, beyond the Candyman himself, because he provides a natural bridge between the films. We're three years on and he's touring in support of a book he's written on the legend; the presentation he gives at his book signing is a solid primer that brings new viewers quickly up to speed. No, you don't need to see the first film first, but I'd recommend it anyway because it's damn good.

Purcell's appearance here also links us directly to Ethan Tarrant, who initially appears to be a deranged fan, a believer in the Candyman who prophesies that the professor will be murdered next, but who quickly becomes far more. You see, New Orleans is Daniel Robitaille's home turf, even if he mysteriously ended his days in Chicago, and the Candyman's previous victim was Tarrant's father, Coleman, another believer who had gone to Purcell for help. It doesn't take much imagination to see where we're going here, especially if I tell you how posh the Tarrants are. Their name is pronounced with an emphasis on its second syllable, Coleman was



an attorney with credible aspirations of serving on the Supreme Court and his widow's name is something as mundane as Octavia. The family even brought up their children in the ancestral mansion, a former plantation called Esplanade; they're high society in the Big Easy, even if little Annie Tarrant works as an art teacher at St. Vincent's, where most of her young students are coloured and poor.

And here I have to wonder if something I couldn't help but notice was deliberate or not, as it appears important. The obvious goal is to set up Annie, a product of generations of privilege, as socially colourblind, caring deeply about all her students, whatever their colour or heritage. This, of course, connects her with Robitaille, who dared to love a woman of a different colour. The catch is that the script doesn't seem to follow suit.

Annie's principal is African American and clearly a good man too, but what's his name? We're not told. The white cop who believes Ethan is the Candyman killer is Det. Ray Levesque, but who's that African American lady working with him? The credits tells us she's Pam Carver, but the film doesn't. I assumed she's his superior officer, but we're not told that either. When Matthew, one of Annie's students, vanishes, she tracks down his father; the credits tell us he's Rev. Ellis, but people only call him "the Reverend". Is this subconscious racism or a clever plot device to lessen characters of colour by denying them their very names?





I may be way off base, but it feels to me like the scriptwriters watched the first picture, failed to understand what it was about and assumed that its success was due to the many African American characters appealing to a new audience for horror films, so wrote the sequel with that in mind. In other words, it looks consistent but it doesn't play that way because it's really just a slasher with the monster from *Candyman*.

However, even if that's true, as I do believe it is, there's enough of substance that bleeds through from the first film to the second to make it a worthwhile view anyway. Some of the best things about *Farewell to the Flesh* revolve around the mythology of the Candyman and the rest tie either to Kelly Rowan, who plays Annie Tarrant with a power that echoes that of Virginia Madsen in the first picture, or the city of New Orleans, which is rarely a poor location for a movie but here provides particularly strong contrasts between carefree carnival and poverty-struck projects, two worlds that never seem to touch.

Rowan isn't a busy film actress; her prior feature to this was *Hook* four years earlier, in which she played Peter's mother. She's far better known for her television work, with substantial runs in *Lonesome Dove: The Outlaw Years*, *Perception* and *The O.C.*, the latter of which won her a PRISM award for her authentic depiction of a recovering alcoholic. She's very good here too, even though Annie isn't remotely as meaningful a character as Helen Lyle, her equivalent in the original movie. She grounds her character magnificently and, if Tony Todd gives the film its soul, Rowan provides its heart. Of course, that leaves the city of New Orleans to portray its guts, an appropriate role for a city which felt to me to be a living creature when I visited it last. That's almost two decades ago now but I can still taste the air and feel the vibrancy of the place. Walking down streets in the French Quarter, it felt like people were born in the streets, lived out their lives and eventually died right there where they began. That's an appropriate location indeed for this picture!

As the film begins, we're three days away from Lent, which means two days from Mardi Gras, the climax of the carnival period in the Crescent City, which would have been building for two weeks. Mardi Gras is also the

climax to our movie, appropriately enough, given both the religious and historical significance of the date.

Lent is a period when many Christians remember the forty days which Jesus spent fasting in the desert by either fasting themselves or choosing other forms of self-denial like giving up something that they enjoy. Given that people didn't historically have the technology to preserve proscribed food until the end of Lent, to avoid it going to waste they ate it by Shrove Tuesday, which I knew in Protestant England as Pancake Day but which natives of Catholic Louisiana know in French as Mardi Gras or Fat Tuesday. It seems almost obvious to use such a day, in which everyone in the city of New Orleans is exercising their appetites during the lurid atmosphere of their sprawling annual carnival, as the backdrop to the killing spree of a supernatural murderer.

Sadly, this story isn't as integrated into the carnival as deeply as we're all hoping, so it serves as a background far more than it does a location. Fortunately, that background is explored in interesting ways, such as the provision of a carnival DJ, the King Fish, broadcasting on WBOV, to guide us through both the season and the feature. Sometimes he's talking about the carnival, sometimes the Candyman and sometimes both at once, such as when he explains the film's subtitle: "carnival" is Latin for "farewell to the flesh", another nod to the fasting of Lent, in which many give up meat, but also a nod to the deaths at the Candyman's hook and his own plans, as we discover on Mardi Gras itself. The King Fish is an endearing presence, courtesy of the smooth Cajun tones of one Russell Buchanan, a singer and actor who's discovered a new career as a political blogger with a sense of humour. "Yes, the movie was met with mixed reviews," he says of his big flop, *Rhinestone*, "Some critics thought it was bad and some thought it was worse. But, dammit, I was funny!"

And I got a lot deeper here than I intended for a film that surely aims to be a slasher. Whatever reason the scriptwriters conjured up to explain the success of *Candyman*, they weren't so obtuse to realise that many watched it for its death scenes. There are more of those here and they're agreeably bloody; the King Fish surely echoes the audience when he introduces one

more song with, “This goes out to the man with the hook!” My favourite kill, beyond the tasty satisfaction of watching Dr. Purcell get his at the beginning, was when the insertion of the Candyman’s hook through an entire body prompts a spurt of blood onto the face and into the mouth of Annie Tarrant. It’s icky but it’s stylish. That’s the same scene where Annie scratches the killer’s face in anger and bees fly out. That special effect still impresses me, even though the bees used in the flashback scene to Daniel Robitaille’s lynching are beyond awful. Bizarrely, a few of the death scenes underwhelm, such as the one given to the best known actor in the movie, Veronica Cartwright.

And, no, that’s hardly a spoiler! Cartwright plays Octavia Tarrant, the haughty mother of Annie and Ethan, so the odds on her demise were so high from the very outset that bookies wouldn’t have taken any bets. If you think that’s a spoiler, you should avoid reviews forthwith! Anyway, she’s decent in a relatively insubstantial role because she sneaks in the sort of nuance that only good character actors can find; I wonder if Kelly Rowan paid attention because she does the same thing.

The only other actor to manage a similar accomplishment is Matt Clark as a black market dealer called Honore Thibideaux, as Cajun as his name suggests even though he’s not even a Southerner, instead hailing from as far north as Washington, D.C. All these character actors were sidelined far

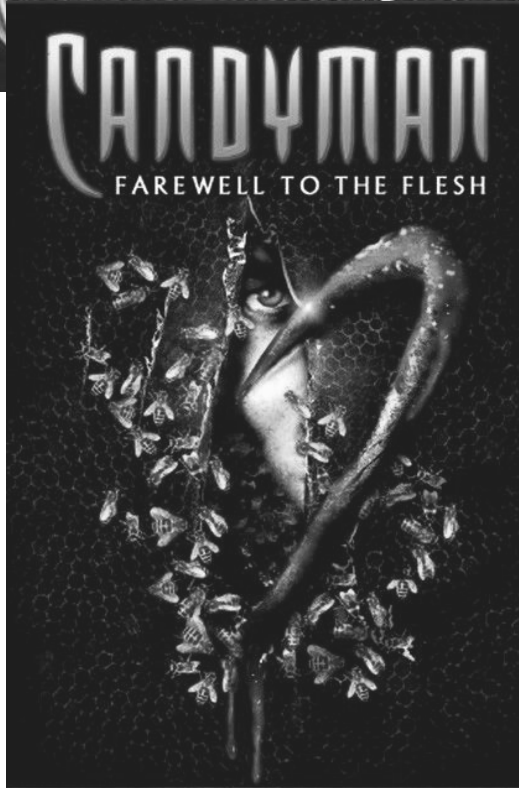
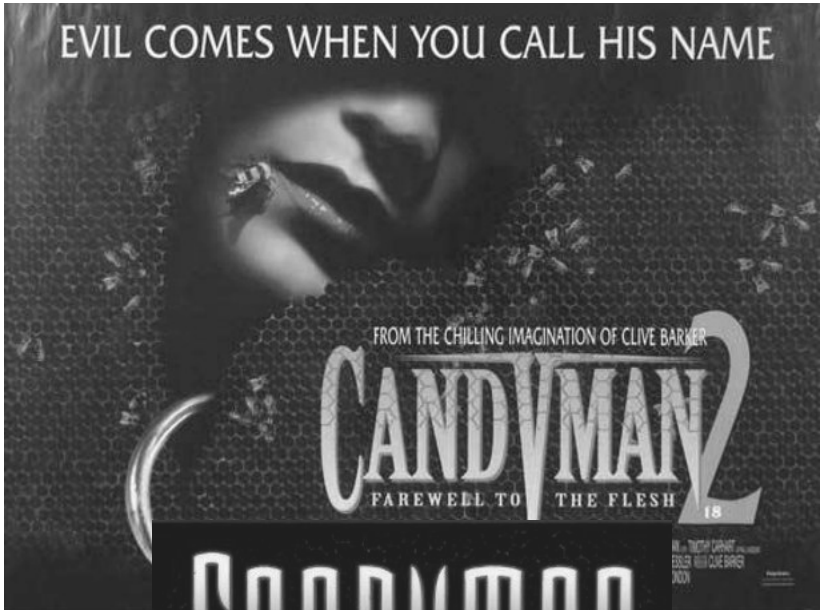


too much in this film, in favour of more screen time for Tony Todd; the picture suffers for its surface approach and would surely have been more successful had it shown less and explained more through the talents of supporting actors like Cartwright and Clark.

For those inquisitive about this franchise, check out *Candyman* first. Once you realise how underrated that film is and how it really doesn't need any further explanation, you can make a choice as to whether to follow up with this or not. If you do that and enjoy it anyway, then there's a third in the series that you'll want to finish up with. It's *Candyman: Day of the Dead*, released straight to DVD in 1999 and, as you might expect, it exploits a holiday as well, beginning on the eve of Día de Muertos, the Mexican Day of the Dead. It also features Tony Todd, of course, because it wouldn't be easy to replace his tall, imposing frame and calm demeanour, but it adds the *Playboy* centerfold and *Baywatch* regular, Donna D'Errico, and appears to take the racial angle in a Hispanic direction which doesn't appear to make any sense on the face of it. I'll check it out anyway, just to see, but its reputation isn't even as good as this film, let alone the original.

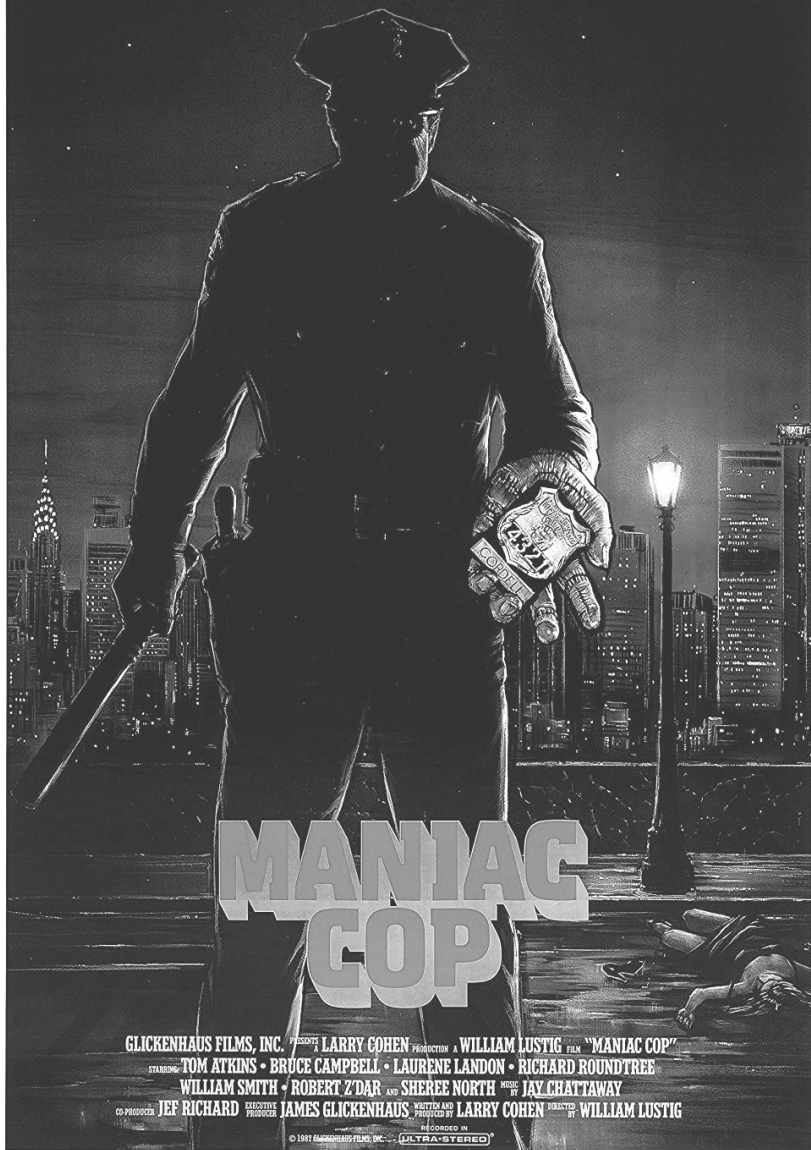
As I wrote this, Daniel Robitaille hadn't resurfaced in the 21st century yet but he returned in 2021 for a new sequel to the original co-written by Jordan Peele. But hey, we can always find out what the Candyman's been up to. We just have to look in a mirror and recite his name five times...





YOU HAVE THE RIGHT TO REMAIN SILENT...

FOREVER.



GLICKENHAUS FILMS, INC. PRESENTS A LARRY COHEN PRODUCTION A WILLIAM LUSTIG FILM "MANIAC COP"

STARRING TOM ATKINS • BRUCE CAMPBELL • LAURENE LONDON • RICHARD ROUNDTREE

WILLIAM SMITH • ROBERT Z'DAR AND SHEREE NORTH MUSIC BY JAY CHATTAWAY

CO PRODUCER JEFF RICHARD EXECUTIVE PRODUCER JAMES GLICKENHAUS WRITER AND DIRECTOR LARRY COHEN PRODUCED BY LARRY COHEN DIRECTED BY WILLIAM LUSTIG

RECORDED IN  
© 1981 Glickenhous Films, Inc. (ULTRA-STEREO)

## MANIAC COP (1988)

St. Patrick's Day

Director: William Lustig

Writer: Larry Cohen

Stars: Tom Atkins, Bruce Campbell, Laurene Landon, Richard Roundtree, William Smith, Robert Z'Dar and Sheree North

No, this is not a politically charged drama about the current state of police violence in the United States, even if we have a prominent African American actor in the cast; Richard Roundtree of *Shaft* fame actually plays the police commissioner. Unlike *Candyman: Farewell to the Flesh*, this isn't a movie about race. The title character is driven by revenge instead and that places this in an interesting category.

It's a horror movie, first and foremost, but it's also a revenge flick; that my copy appears on the other side of a DVD from *The Exterminator* isn't just because James Glickenhaus executive produced this and directed that. And, of course, it's a product of the late eighties, arguably picking up from *RoboCop* in 1987 and creating a hilariously surreal trend of mashing up every sub-genre imaginable with cop movies. Every year from this point on brought an idiotic new example of *Something New and Ridiculous Cop*: *Psycho Cop* in 1989, *Vampire Cop* and *Omega Cop* in 1990, *Karate Cop* and *Samurai Cop* in 1991, *Cyborg Cop* in 1993, *Scanner Cop* in 1994, *Gladiator Cop* in 1995... and onwards. We'll ignore *Kindergarten Cop*, of course, to keep sane, and what did I miss from 1992? Surely the trend didn't take a year out.

This certainly looks like a cop movie to begin with, with Officer Cordell putting on his uniform with all its accoutrements in slo-mo as the opening credits roll. We're in New York, the twin towers very much in evidence in the opening long shot, and Cordell is one of the city's finest. The problem is that the public's trust in the boys in blue is being rapidly eroded by a series of brutal murders apparently committed by one of them.

First up is Cassie Philips, who gets the better of a pair of muggers only

to stumble into the wrong policeman for help. He promptly lifts her off the ground by her throat and snaps her neck. "It was a cop, man," the muggers tell the authorities, "a big cop!" And, while there are disbelievers, Frank McCrae, NYPD veteran in the compulsory trenchcoat, believes those dumb kids. He doesn't see how they could have done it and, as the killings continue, he reasons that it has to be someone inside the department, not the commissioner's wishful suggestion that it's some psycho who's merely impersonating a cop in an attempt to discredit the force.

And so we're off and running. There's a lot wrong with this film, but the most unfortunate mistake was to cast so many character actors and give them so little to do. Tom Atkins does a capable job as Frank McCrae, but he's clearly not stretched by anything he's tasked with here. Of course, he's been playing cops since his debut in Frank Sinatra's *The Detective* in 1968, so it had to have been second nature for him by this point. Richard Roundtree, a decade and a half after *Shaft*, is also capable as Commissioner Pike but he could play this part in his sleep. Only William Smith as Captain Ripley is really notable, but that's mostly because he's more like Michael Rooker here than Michael Rooker would have been. Of course, Rooker had only begun his career two years earlier, while Smith's goes back all the way to *The Ghost of Frankenstein* in 1942 when he was a mere nine years old. This highlighted to me how much the former must have paid attention to the work of the latter! Smith had an incredible 78 year career on the big screen and his filmography is a history of exploitation cinema. He passed last year at the age of 88.

Now, people don't tend to think of *Maniac Cop* as a Tom Atkins movie, even though he's the lead actor and the focal point for most of it; they think of it as a Bruce Campbell movie. This was early for the Big Chin, coming right after *Evil Dead II* and before *Intruder*, so he looks scarily young and he was only beginning to realise just how well his enviable charisma could bolster his nascent acting skills into a magnetic combination. It's quite clear that Atkins, Roundtree and Smith could act circles round him without even trying, but his character, Patrolman Jack Forrest, is cheating on his wife with Laurene Landon, whose acting is so awful here that she'd



make me look good. Landon plays Theresa Mallory, another cop, and her part becomes more important (if less substantial) as the film runs on. I've enjoyed her work in guilty pleasures like *Hundra* and *Yellow Hair and the Fortress of Gold*, but she's embarrassingly bad here and nobody benefits from that more than Campbell, who suddenly seems like Marlon Brando when performing opposite her.

It's no spoiler to point out that Campbell isn't the Maniac Cop of the title. I won't spoil who is, though it won't surprise you in the slightest, but Forrest is quite obviously in the movie to be set up to look like the killer.

There have been three deaths thus far, each committed in a different way—the second was a young driver, a little the worse for wear, who's slashed across the throat then hurled into the windscreen of his own car, while the third was an innocent man drowned in setting concrete—and everyone is suddenly a little more scared of the boys in blue. Ellen Forrest is even scared of her own husband, because he wakes up screaming in the middle of the night and never seems to stay home; a strange woman even rings Ellen up to suggest that he's the killer, teasing, "He went out again, didn't he?" So she follows him, not to work but to a motel, where she discovers his affair with Mallory, waves her gun around, wanders off, gets murdered by the Maniac Cop and is found in the very room in which she found her husband.



So into custody Forrest goes, where he seems to forget about his wife almost instantly. That's just one awkward part of the script, written by exploitation legend, Larry Cohen, who also wrote *Black Caesar*, *It's Alive* and *The Stuff*. The next is how we're supposed to expect Forrest to remain the primary suspect as the real murderer continues his spree, starting with Mallory, who's out working vice in a horrendous wig. When the killer tries to murder her, Frank McCrae shows up and the supernatural angle to the story shows up with him. A dozen bullets to the chest later, the killer is gone, apparently into nowhere. He wasn't breathing, she says. His hands were cold as ice, she says. Suddenly we don't just have Maniac Cop on our hands, we have Death Cop, Zombie Cop, Voorhees Cop. Of course, this angle is mostly ignored from this point on, but it did help him to return for two sequels, the imaginatively titled *Maniac Cop 2* in 1990 and then *Maniac Cop 3: Badge of Silence* in 1993. McCrae even figures out who the killer is but apparently fails to tell anyone, so Forrest stays behind bars.

Fortunately, here we get the best performance in the film, courtesy of Sheree North, sadly the least well known of the stars, who deserves the credit even if her character, Sally Noland, is quite frankly the only one with any opportunity for an actor. She was a notable character actor, even if her greatest claim to fame was being pushed by her studio as "the new Marilyn Monroe". Her work should speak for itself, from major films like



*Charley Varrick*, *The Shootist* and *Telefon* to memorable television roles like Lou Grant's girlfriend and Kramer's mum; she was nominated for a pair of primetime Emmys. Here, she's a cop who's stuck indoors working a desk job because she wears a big brace on her mangled leg and walks with the aid of a cane. Her first and most subdued scene is fantastic and her more hysterical ones are superb too. She's invested enough in the story to be believable when she shrieks in abject fear like a madwoman, completely unlike Landon who somehow forgets she's a cop and turns into a random slasher movie victim to be.

It's around this point that the grand mystery is unveiled, to nobody's surprise, and we can shift from the cops trying to figure out whodunit to the cops attempting to stop whodunit from, well, doing it any more. For all that this is a horror movie, the New York backdrop is shot well enough to make this feel like a seventies throwback to pictures like *Dirty Harry*. It's fair to suggest that Cohen took movies like that and applied a little bit of realism, asking what would actually happen to a cop who was that tough and uncompromising and deciding that he'd be discarded by City Hall and sent to Sing Sing, where you can take over to imagine what happens next. Frankly, if that could be a movie all on its own, this film is the sequel that acknowledges that it's the late eighties, realises that everyone's renting horror flicks with outrageous titles on VHS from the shelves of *Blockbuster*, and shifts firmly into that mode, throwing in a new star with a big chin for good measure. Why it didn't do better at the time, I have absolutely no idea. It's hardly the best film ever made but it does the job it means to do.

And eventually, we get to why I'm reviewing it on 17th March. It's St. Patrick's Day, the one day a year when every American is suddenly of Irish heritage. Nobody pinches the Maniac Cop for not wearing green—though wouldn't that be a hoot?—but everything does come down during the big St. Patrick's Day parade through the streets of New York. Well, sort of.

We veer away from it pretty quickly, but for a while it's all kilts and bagpipes and reporter Sam Raimi talking up how dangerous it is this year. Apparently, some bomb threats have been called in, among scores of other threats against the police, but they're going ahead anyway with the 50th

anniversary parade. It would seem that nobody told Larry Cohen that this particular St. Patrick's Day parade, honest to Bog, predates the signing of the Declaration of Independence by fourteen years! 1988's parade would have been the 227th, a number truly unimaginable here in Arizona, a state so young that we'd only just passed three quarters of a century. Maybe Cohen thought fifty years was more believable to us westerners.

There are so many possibilities for a film shooting during a real parade, especially one of this size, but it doesn't seem like Lustig got the permits, so he settles for having extras wave protest signs behind attendees at the real parade. I wonder if anyone realised what was actually happening at the time; did staff go out to have these real people sign waivers? Cohen doesn't even throw in any "dyeing the river red" jokes, mostly wasting the atmosphere while our heroes and villain chase off to the docks for their inevitable showdown.

At least, while obviously scrimping on the budget, the production does show that it has some balls here. The chase scene feels like it's older than 1988 because the vehicles are clearly moving really fast and the unknown stuntman who doubles for Campbell during the scene where he backflips off a flying paddywagon (well it is St. Patrick's Day) into the river is really doing that. There isn't any CGI and there aren't any dummies. That's old school filmmaking shot on 35mm to boot and we appreciate the stunts immensely, yet again wishing that directors would do that more.

And, as we set up for the inevitable sequel, we think back and realise that as underwhelming as this script is, as little opportunity as it gives its stars and as stunningly awful as Laurene Landon is in the picture, there are a bunch of little details that made it seem decent anyway. Real stunts are just part of it. There's real physical make-up work too, especially on the face of Robert Z'Dar, a man whose chin doesn't just trump Campbell's but challenges American Dad's. There's real IT, the new-fangled computer gizmos the cops are struggling to figure out being greenscreen antiques talking to kludgy databases rather than the idiotic eternal zoom machines we get today. We have an actual records room where cops go to pull out actual clippings from actual newspapers. There's an electronic score from

Jay Chattaway that doesn't feel embarrassing almost thirty years on, just appropriate. Even the poster works well, with a cheap but memorable tagline: "You have the right to remain silent... forever."

Surprisingly, *Maniac Cop* didn't do particularly well in 1988. It only made half its budget back at the box office, but it gradually built a reputation as a cult film. Having so many cult names involved surely can't have hurt: Campbell is perhaps the definition of the huge cult star today, but many fans are also aware of Atkins, Landon, Roundtree, Smith and Z'Dar, not to mention writer Cohen and, to a degree, director Lustig. That only leaves Sheree North, of the top billed cast, and she deserves to be much better known than she is today. Sam Raimi isn't hard to recognise, but the eagle-eyed will also notice George "Buck" Flower in a tiny role, director William Lustig in a cameo and maybe even his uncle, world middleweight boxing champion Jake LaMotta, the Raging Bull himself, who plays a detective. I couldn't find him, but he's in there somewhere. It's the names more than anything, but also the genre merging that has helped this live on. Just like its title character, it refuses to die and, beyond the two sequels, there's still talk of a remake, with Nicolas Winding Refn continually attached as director, which could actually be timely and appropriate. If it happens, I'm sure you'll find out.

Oh, and, by the way, mine's a Guinness. Sláinte!



MARTY MAJORED IN  
CUTTING CLASSMATES...



# SLAUGHTER HIGH

A STEVE MINASIAN and DICK RANDALL Production of a GEORGE DUGDALE

MARK EZRA PETER LITTEN Film

Director of Photography ALAN FIDNEY Music by HARRY MANFREDINI

Edited by JIM CONNOCK Produced by STEVE MINASIAN and DICK RANDALL

Starring CAROLINE MUNRO with SIMON SCUDDAMORE as MARTY

KELLY BAKER SALLY CROSS BILLY HARTMAN CARMINE IANNOCCONE

GARY MARTIN MICHAEL SAFFRAN JOSEPHINE SCANDI JOHN SEGAN

and introducing DONNA TEASER

Written and Directed by GEORGE DUGDALE

MARK EZRA PETER LITTEN

## SLAUGHTER HIGH (1986)

*April Fools' Day*

Directors: George Dugdale, Mark Ezra and Peter Litten

Writers: George Dugdale, Mark Ezra and Peter Litten

Stars: Caroline Munro and Simon Scuddamore

April Fools' Day has been associated with pranks since *The Canterbury Tales* in 1392, so it's yet another thing we can blame on Geoffrey Chaucer, if not the Romans, who had a festival called Hilaria about a week later. Of course, there's an *April Fool's Day* horror movie, released in 1986 and well worth watching, but I felt that it was a little too obvious for this project.

Instead, I chose another *April Fool's Day* that was released in 1986 but was renamed first to *Slaughter High* to avoid confusion—or a lawsuit from the lawyers of Paramount, a studio with much deeper pockets than the indie production company called Spectacular Trading International, who only made four original feature films, this one preceded in their portfolio by *Crocodile Fangs*, *Deep Thoughts* and *Don't Open Till Christmas*.

To highlight the magnificent power of irony, this version was clearly shot first, given that its lead actor, Simon Scuddamore, committed suicide in November 1984, right after the film wrapped; it's very possible that the *April Fool's Day* everybody knows wasn't even started until after that date. Further irony lies in these two slasher movies, a fundamentally American genre, were shot in Canada and the UK respectively. Then again, it did all begin in Italy with *A Bay of Blood* aka *Twitch of the Death Nerve*, right?

This isn't a particularly notable slasher, but then the genre isn't known for its notable films; it's known instead for its memorable maniacs and its imaginative deaths. *Slaughter High* is perhaps the dumbest classic slasher I've ever seen, but it does feature a memorable maniac and it has a few highly imaginative deaths, so it's built up a minor cult following over the decades. I can actually see this picture growing in esteem after repeated viewings because, while it certainly aims to be another slasher, it perhaps

unintentionally becomes an early and solid example of the urban legend horror movie, six years before the first *Candyman*. It becomes at least 100% better if we choose to imagine that it isn't a real movie with a story we're intended to believe and decide instead that it's a YouTube video about an urban legend that makes no sense but people are talking about anyway. After all, in this world of alternative facts and perception equalling truth, what's to say that isn't what it is. If we believe it, then it's true, right? What if we want to believe it, because it would be better that way? Does that work?

Initially, it isn't as stupid as it is outrageous, because the particular prank that kicks it off is truly brutal. We're at Doddsville High, founded in 1857 and looking rather cool from the outside. I'd buy that building for a dollar! We arrive just in time for a chemistry nerd by the name of Marty Rantzen to have the time of his life, or at least so he thinks. After all, Carol Manning is holding his hand and dragging him to the girls' locker room to make his day.

Given that Carol Manning is played by the 35 year old Caroline Munro, a Bond girl and Hammer star who looks utterly stunning, we can perhaps understand why he can't believe his luck. Of course, it's all an April Fools joke and when he springs buck naked from the shower, it's to discover an entire film crew of students shooting him on video, hosing him down with a fire extinguisher and prodding him with a javelin. By the time that the janitor sends in the coach, these pranksters have electrocuted Marty on the towel rack, stuck his head into the toilet and flushed it. It's hardly his day but, trust me, it's about to get a lot worse.

The coach puts everyone, except Marty of course, into detention in the gym, but he has very little control over them. Two of that number go to Marty to "apologise" by giving him some extra-special dope to smoke, as if that would make it all OK. Why Marty would trust these numbwits, I have no idea, but he does and that leads to him running out of the chem lab mid-experiment to puke his guts up. He returns to his bubbling beakers after team captain Skippy Pollack has sabotaged them, having temporarily escaped detention to make this already horrendous situation even worse.



Next thing we know, the lab catches fire and a large bottle inappropriately stored on a rickety shelf above Marty's head topples into the inferno and splashes nitric acid all over his face. They all run to watch poor Marty stuck in a burning lab, horribly disfigured and fighting for his life. They watch in horror, but not in guilt. If it wasn't 1986, I swear they'd be taking selfies against the burning background. What a bunch of prizes they are!

So, you can see the "outrageous"; here's the "stupid". It's a rare actor here who's under thirty and not a single member of this cast is believably in high school. If they retook their senior year half a dozen times, as could be possible, I still wouldn't buy into these actors in these roles. So, when we leap forward an undetermined amount of years—someone mentions five late on—and none of them look like they've aged a day, the credibility of the picture is on shaky ground before it even gets moving.

It continues to stretch our belief throughout, like it was made by Willy Wonka and it flaunts "unbreakable" on the tin. All these miscreants find their way back to Doddsville High to enjoy their class reunion, but cutey Carol is the only one who actually dresses up for the occasion. Then again, they fail to notice a great deal: like they're the only ones there, the school is now derelict and, of all things, the sun goes down. How many people wait outside an empty building drinking beer for a class reunion that is clearly not going to happen? Well, these ten, that's who.



The actors are mostly forgettable, there mostly as a challenge to us to figure out which ones are under thirty, and the names don't get thrown around well enough for us to associate most of them. Beyond Skip being the leader of the pack and Carol the bait, we really have to cross-reference who dies in which way with the name associated with that death online in Wikipedia; that works fine now but it wasn't so easy in movie theatres in 1986. Well, Stella's easy to identify because she's the bubbly blonde, while Frank and Joe are only distinguishable because the former drives a pickup truck and the latter shows up on a motorbike. Once they're inside, we lose track again. Oh, and yes, they do find a way inside. Eventually. By breaking in. These morons still believe that there's a class reunion waiting for them inside. What's perhaps most ridiculous is that there is, complete with a banner and beer and a reasonably capable spread. And they tuck in as if no red flags have gone up at all. Suddenly, every cabin in the woods movie seems utterly realistic and how could anyone think that Clark Kent is the same person as Superman?

So far, the biggest problem the movie has is that Biff from *Back to the Future* isn't here to rap on everyone's head, shouting "McFly!" but the next biggest problem is Everything Else. Fortunately we're about to start on the imaginative death scenes, prompted by an astute comment by Skip when they all suddenly remember Marty Rantzen: "We turned him from a nice



little guy,” he recalls, “into a crazed lunatic.” Now, that line is delivered and received with so much gravitas that I was honestly surprised that it wasn’t backed by a laugh track. Someone really should overdub this movie with “wah wah wah” noises, because it could make it blisteringly funny in all the wrong ways.

Anyway, Marty, I mean, the killer—like there’s ever the slightest doubt that the killer is someone other than the poor dude that they humiliated, burned and disfigured for a stupid prank five years earlier—starts in on his revenge. First up is Digby, who shouldn’t have been on the list anyway, as he’s just the janitor. He’s lifted up through the strength of the insane and impaled on a coat hook, just like David in the prologue to *Hospital Massacre*.

But then we get Ted. Ted Harrison goes out in glorious fashion! He picks up a PBR and shotguns it, a term I had to look up because, being English, I’m blissfully unaware of fratboy rituals that I haven’t seen in movies. That means that he punctures the can close to its base, then puts his mouth to the hole, pulls the tab and chugs it down in a flash. Ted is apparently very good at shotgunning, but is sadly unaware that the killer had replaced the beer with some sort of acid that mysteriously doesn’t destroy aluminium but does make quick work of his stomach. His nether regions promptly flip inside out and he collapses dead on the floor.

We’re almost at the halfway mark and we’re two down with nine to go! Finally, *Slaughter High* has potential to be something other than stupid! In fact, it finally dawns on our myriad morons that maybe something’s up and they should all run away very fast indeed. Sadly for them, Marty has the brain that none of them have so he’s already locked all the doors and electrocuted all the windows. I cheered hard for Marty. *Go, mad killer, go!*

Half of me doesn’t want to talk about the death scenes here because they comprise most of the good things about this movie, but I find that I must submit to the other half which wants to rave about them. We know, of course, that there are rules that you must follow if you want to survive a horror movie and it’s abundantly clear that Stella hasn’t read the list. She’s with Joe nowadays but, for some reason, she decides to make out with Frank instead, while her man is off somewhere trying to save their

lives. They find a room, strip down and get their freak on. Just as Stella's about to reach an electrifying climax, she grasps the metal frame of the bed and, well, let's just say that her orgasm was a little more electrifying than she expected. Unbeknownst to her, Joe wouldn't have minded her infidelity on grounds of being dead at the time. While he's underneath a tractor, repairing it for a low speed escape attempt, the killer hands him a wrench, then switches the vehicle on and drops it on him. Too slow, Joe! What a bloody mess he becomes!

To be fair, there are other good things here, just not many of them. I actually started a list of the things that win in *Slaughter High*. Most obvious is stupidity, which is so engrained in the fabric of the film that it's almost the lead character, the quarterback and the bimbo cheerleader all in one.

The single most stupid thing I think I've ever seen in the entire history of the movies is Nancy's suggestion that the revenge-crazed lunatic that has already mangled seven out of the ten pranksters on his personal hitlist will adhere to the rules of April Fools' Day and stop at noon, though this is a common component in the British version of the April Fool.

Carol's ass is surely the star of the last half an hour, because we sit there watch it running away from the camera in high heels for the majority of it, or at least I thought so. Frankly, it's worth a full ninety minutes, and unless there's a truly stunning coincidence, George Dugdale, one of the three writer/directors, thought so too, given that he married her in 1990. He's a lucky man indeed. Carol's flouncy white outfit is a winner as well, because it has magic dirt-repelling capabilities. If only she had marketed it instead of going to a class reunion of death!

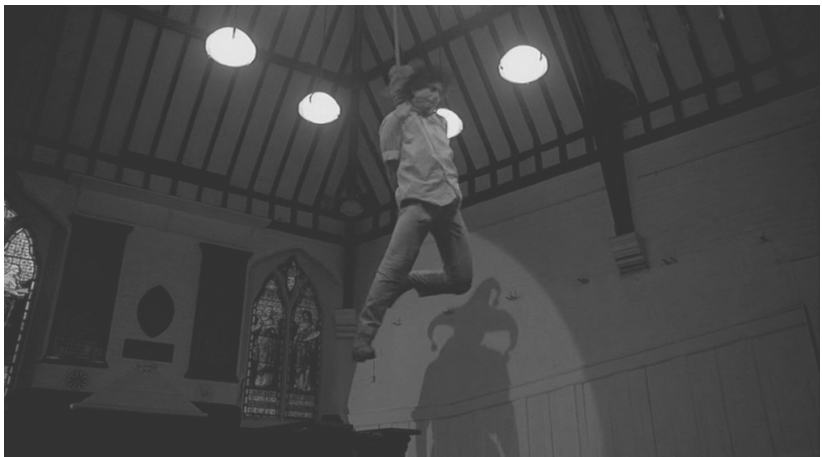
The score by Harry Manfredini, justly famed for his soundtrack for *Friday the 13th*, is a high point too. It's an odd electronic affair, a surprising success for something that couldn't ever be dated to any decade except the eighties. The main theme is really just eight notes that squelch, which shouldn't ever work, but I've found myself humming them all day.

You'll notice here that I haven't said anything about the acting in these paragraphs about the positives, but there is one aspect that I'll call out. Skip Pollack is played by Carmine Iannaccone, in his screen debut, and I

have to cruelly point out that young Carmine was never going to win an Oscar. However, I'm actually surprised at the brevity of his career because he has a dramatic flair that would have been perfect for straight to video genre flicks. He's a real drama queen, shining in overdone moments where he poses like he's delivering Shakespearean magic instead of just swearing at Marty to come out and show himself. I have no idea if any of this was deliberate but I loved it and it could have taken him a long way.

Now, he's far from the only actor here to fail to go a long way. Most of the cast made either nothing else or almost nothing. Gary Martin is a rare exception, as he's built quite a substantial career out of his voice, starting in 1994 with *The Neverending Story III*. He's a busy man, not something I'd have expected from his performance as Joe. Frank, his lust rival here, also went onto a substantial career, with Billy Hartman racking up over five hundred episodes of British soap opera *Emmerdale Farm* as Terry Woods.

Of course, nobody listening to the American accents can really believe that these actors live in Los Angeles with stars next door. They're mostly, if not entirely, British actors trying to sound like Americans because, hey, who would have watched a British slasher in 1986? They do slip up rather often, but it's probably fair to say that they do a better job than most of the Americans who attempt to sound like Brits. Hello, Kevin Costner! What was that? Dick van Dyke? Maybe producer Dick Randall submitted this to



the major studios as an all American movie, waited for them to fall for it, then echoed the locker room pranksters by screaming, “April Fool!”

Perhaps film fans would have recognised it as England more from the architecture than the accents, because Doddsville High fails to ring true as American in the slightest. The outside is actually a small part of Holloway Sanatorium, a “hospital for the insane of the middle class”, which is about as quintessentially English as it gets. It was built in Surrey in the Franco-Gothic style and financed by Thomas Holloway, whose fortune ironically manifested through his selling of quack medicine, self described cure-alls that did nothing medically but were advertised with finesse.

As Holloway was still operational in the mid-seventies, we never find our way inside. The interiors were shot within St. Marylebone Grammar School in Westminster, whose alumni include notables as varied as Adam Ant and authors Jerome K. Jerome and Len Deighton. That suggests that the level of education was high, so the writers of this film can’t possibly have gone there themselves, because nobody with any education higher than a couple of weeks of *Sesame Street* could ever have conjured up this ending. It’s a twist in search of a point in a film in search of a reason and it makes less sense than anything that went before it in a movie that not once made any semblance of sense. April Fool, indeed.

By the way, April Fools’ Day is a fascinating holiday, one whose roots go



back so far that its traditions may predate that of any other holiday. For instance, it has been suggested, as far back as 1769, that Noah's sending a dove out over the flood waters on the first day of April counts as a rather brutal April Fool prank.

Tradition in many countries has the joke be time consuming and surely embarrassing without being brutal. In Scotland and Ireland, this tends to involve sending someone on an errand to deliver an important message, that message invariably being to continue the Fool's journey by taking it further to someone else. In France, and other countries in western Europe, it often takes the form of trying to attach a paper fish onto someone else's back. Perhaps the reason for this is that April Fools' Day is called *Poisson d'Avril* in France, *April Vis* in the Netherlands and *Pesce d'Aprile* in Italy, each one of these names translating to "April Fish".

Nowadays, of course, April Fools' Day generally involves disbelieving absolutely anything we might read online, which made my posting of this review on 1st April rather counter-productive. In Nordic countries, media outlets tend to publish one and only one false story on 1st April, often on the front page, which seems like a fair balance. Certainly, real news stories have been disbelieved in the past because of their publication date, from warnings about the tsunami caused by an earthquake in the Aleutians in 1946 through the murders of Marvin Gaye and Selena to Google's launch of their Gmail product.

To me, the best April Fool jokes are the ones delivered by those who don't deliver April Fool jokes because, of course they don't. Anyone who grew up in England a generation earlier than me will promptly remember the hoax perpetrated on Panorama, the BBC's ultra-serious current affairs programme, all about the spaghetti harvest in Switzerland. Decades later, CNN described this broadcast as "the biggest hoax that any reputable news establishment ever pulled" and my mother's mother, God rest her soul, believed it until the day she died.

CHRISTOPHER LAMBERT

Be afraid,  
for He  
is coming...

FROM RUSSELL MULCAHY, THE DIRECTOR OF HIGHLANDER

# RESURRECTION

INTERLIGHT PICTURES IN ASSOCIATION WITH GALLOVIN COHEN PRODUCTIONS PRESENTS "RESURRECTION" CHRISTOPHER LAMBERT ROBERT JOY LELAND GINSER  
BARBARA TYSON EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS PAUL PUMPHAN & RICHARD COHEN PRODUCED BY HOWARD GALEWIN NILE NAHMI PATRICKSCHAU & CHRISTOPHER LAMBERT  
STORY BY CHRISTOPHER LAMBERT & BRAD MURMAN SCREENPLAY BY BRAD MURMAN DIRECTED BY RUSSELL MULCAHY



## **RESURRECTION (1999)**

*Easter Sunday*

Director: Russell Mulcahy

Writers: Brad Mirman and Christopher Lambert, from a story by Brad Mirman

Stars: Christopher Lambert, Robert Joy, Barbara Tyson, Rick Fox and Leland Orser

In our modern consumerist culture, it's easy to see the holiday of Easter like Bill Hicks described it: "commemorating the death and resurrection of Jesus by telling our children a giant bunny rabbit left chocolate eggs in the night." However, to Christians, it's a cornerstone of the liturgical year, the end of one season and the beginning of another, and it's serious stuff indeed.

It follows the season of Lent, during the six weeks of which Christians often prepare for Easter by fasting or giving up something to symbolise sacrifice. Lent ends with Holy Week, which is rich with key events: Palm Sunday marks the triumphal entrance of Jesus into Jerusalem, Maundy Thursday remembers the Last Supper and Good Friday commemorates the crucifixion of Jesus. This all ends with Easter Sunday, which begins Eastertide with a great celebration, because it's when Jesus rose from the dead after three days in the tomb. After Jesus's birth, marked at Christmas, his resurrection is the most important event in the Christian year.

In fact, it's so important that people have been arguing about it for millennia because, if there's anything better to get a good argument going than politics, it's religion. People bickered about what precise theological significance it bears, how it ties to the Jewish holiday of Passover and even the date on which it should be celebrated. Controversies over when the correct date should be date back as far as the second century and trawl in the First Council of Nicaea and the Synod of Whitby, events you couldn't possibly have imagined reading about in an Apocalypse Later book about

horror movies. Naturally, things only got worse when the western world shifted from the Julian to the Gregorian calendar and they're not even squared away yet.

As recently as 1997, the World Council of Churches proposed reform, suggesting that Easter should be celebrated on a memorable "first Sunday following the first astronomical full moon following the astronomical vernal equinox, as determined from the meridian of Jerusalem." Had that been adopted, it would have taken effect in 2001, a rare year in which the Western and Orthodox dates for Easter coincided. The fact is that it wasn't adopted, of course, and, no doubt, people will continue to argue about it for the foreseeable future.

Given this history, it's almost surprising that we haven't seen a whole bunch of religious horror movies revolving around Easter; after all, death, resurrection and immortality are popular subjects for both mad scientists and Hollywood screenwriters. Well, here's one interesting such attempt, made by some interesting people who work interestingly together.

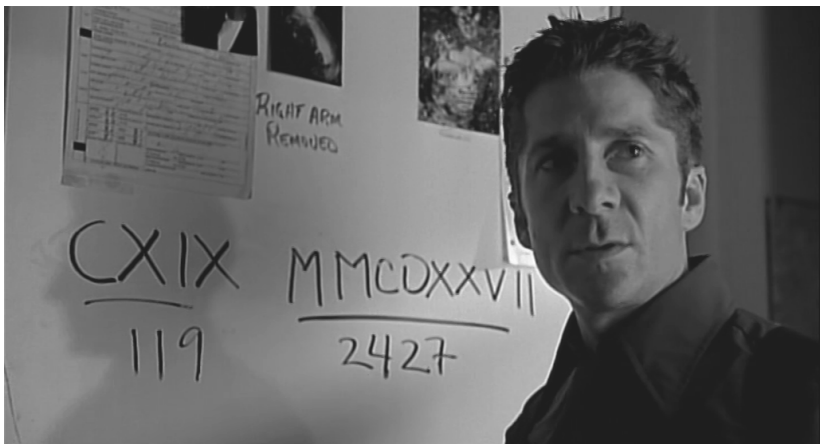
The story was conjured up by Brad Mirman, who wrote and directed the memorable comedy *Crime Spree* in 2003. He's known more as a writer than a director, with a string of screenplays to his name of films that starred Christopher Lambert: *Knight Moves*, *Gideon* and *Highlander III: The Sorcerer* for starters; Lambert co-wrote this one with him and stars in it himself. The director is Russell Mulcahy, who had made him both famous with the original *Highlander* and infamous with its inept sequel, *Highlander II: The Quickening*, which Mirman will no doubt be ecstatic to say he had nothing to do with. It's fair to say that this isn't as original as the former but is a good shot at redemption for the latter.

Lambert is a cop, John Prudhomme by name, who moved from New Orleans to Chicago after the accidental death of his son. He's apparently a decent detective but he's not well liked, presumably because he still hasn't come to terms with his loss. It affects his relationships with his wife, Sara, and his colleagues on the force and it affects us too, because Lambert is notably stiff in the early scenes and we wonder if we'll have to watch such awkward acting throughout the film. Well, we don't, because a tough case

does the job of getting him emotionally invested and that awkwardness fades with our proximity to the killer, epitomised by how the detective's reactions change to the constant jokes of his partner, Andy Hollinsworth. Initially, he fails to even acknowledge them but he eventually joins in and, as bad as these jokes are, they're what he needs to belong again. The very ending of the picture, after the case is solved, is emotionally manipulative but it's OK for a change because Lambert had built steadily up to it for a full ninety minutes.

This case is why I'm reviewing *Resurrection* on Easter Sunday. Someone is killing people in Chicago, which isn't particularly notable, but they're taking body parts from the corpses, which is. I don't mean hair clippings as souvenirs, I mean large body parts: Peter Belcoeur's right arm, Matthew Leeson's left and James Ordway's head. In return for taking things so large and substantial, the killer leaves behind Roman numerals carved into their skin and not small ones either; think CXIX and MMCDXXVII.

It takes three deaths for Prudhomme to figure out the key to the case. Each victim is 33 years old, the age of Jesus when he was crucified. Each is murdered on a Friday, the day on which that happened. Each has both the name and the occupation of one of his apostles. Those numbers are bible references, each chapter and verse covering the return of Jesus. Clearly this imaginative serial killer is re-constituting the body of Christ and there



are three more weeks remaining until Easter Sunday, when the Christian church recognises his resurrection. One message, painted in lamb's blood, reads, "He's coming."

This is a fantastic setup for a dark thriller, especially as the obvious comparison, even from the early scenes, is to David Fincher's *Se7en*, the pinnacle of dark thrillers. Needless to say, this can't match it, but it comes closer than most. It's missing the brutal ironies, the attention to detail and the nested twists (though it does feature one excellent twist that I didn't see coming until almost the moment it was revealed and one neat irony whose depth mirrored the film's). What it does have is a strong sense of pace, an admirable feel and some neatly clever red herrings. It also has some powerful visual set pieces, including the killer's body part montage and the final showdown between cop and killer, with an impressive third party to that clash who adds a great deal of tension to a scene that was already tense. Gareth Wilson, who was a set dresser for films as varied as *Videodrome*, *Naked Lunch* and *Quest for Fire*, is credited for set decoration but the whole art department deserves praise.

The closest the visuals get to *Se7en* arrive when we discover the third victim. He's somewhere beneath Chinatown, in a location that appears to be built out of narrow corridors, naked women and rats. The cops' journey through the former is a particularly claustrophobic one and a sense of real



danger accompanies them. When Joe Mantell advised Jack Nicholson to, “Forget it, Jake, it’s Chinatown,” it was up there on the surface with plenty of space around them. Here, Christopher Lambert and Leland Orser, who is highly believable as his partner, descend into a creepy netherworld, which is increasingly far from safety and in which they’re fully aware nobody will admit to being witness to a man beheaded, drained of blood and posed for effect, not to mention the killer’s escape, presumably through the very same narrow corridors, with the victim’s head. In at least one way, this is more realistic than the more stylised setpieces of *Se7en*, as everything we see is in muted colours, this Chicago being constructed from rain, terror and the colour grey, with only hints at more.

The one aspect I wanted to see the film explore in much more depth is the religious one, which is, after all, the entire point of this setup. As soon as Prudhomme realises what the numbers carved into the flesh of the Numbers Killer’s victims mean, then we’re in religious territory. As the inevitable FBI profiler suggests, this murderer doesn’t see what he does as murder; he’s simply making sacrifices to God. His habit of taking body parts only when their owners can feel what he’s doing deliberately echoes the suffering of Jesus on the cross. There’s more than one meaning to the word “passion” but it’s oddly never highlighted here, even when a key character is set up to walk in similar sandals in a neat little trap. Instead, the only time that the police force decides to seek religious expertise is when Prudhomme goes to see Father Rousell, his former pastor who’s offered help to combat his grief, to find out who the “boanerges” are that the killer references in a fax to the cops.

I found this problematic because this is 1999, so the internet existed and it was relatively easily available to look up anything that a dictionary couldn’t provide the answers to. I remember it well and it wasn’t what it is now, but it would have been fine to obtain an answer to a simple question like that. What it wouldn’t have done is provided deeper insight into the why behind the case, an explanation of what the killer was attempting to do and why he was doing it in that particular way. Those are the questions that the detective should have taken to the priest for answers, but none of

that happens at all. This particular police department is notably insular when it comes to research, its cops only grudgingly talking to a profiler from the FBI who shows up to offer his services, and the biggest gap is the religious one. The scene with Fr. Rousell works because it provides a lead to the next target, which is a rare instance of the filmmakers not trusting the telegraphing of religious points. Those without religious background may miss the rest.

Given the actor who plays Fr. Rousell, I was hoping that the character would have played a far greater part in proceedings as our guide into the religious aspects of the case. He's no less a name than David Cronenberg, the acclaimed writer/director who proved himself as an actor back in 1990 in Clive Barker's *Nightbreed*. Some posters, such as those from France, where *Resurrection* was exhibited theatrically—it was just a straight to DVD title in the States—list Cronenberg prominently above the title, alongside Lambert and Orser, suggesting that he has a huge part to play, but it's really little more than a cameo. He's only given two scenes, one to further the plot and one to help bolster Prudhomme's character. He deserved a good deal more than that and so did the script. The same could be easily applied to Barbara Tyson, as Prudhomme's wife, Sara, and Peter MacNeill as his boss, Capt. Jack Whippley; both are really only in the movie to add depth to Prudhomme's character and help to firm up his story arc as we move forward through the case.

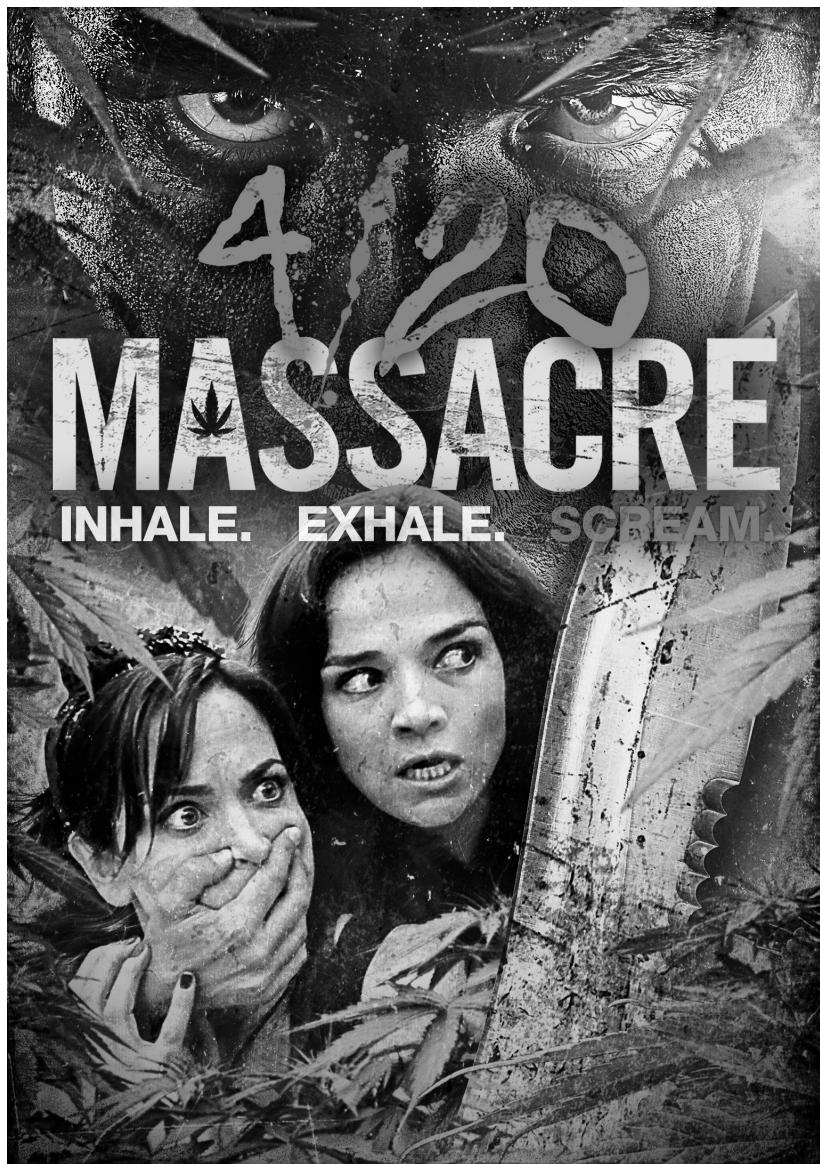
Cronenberg aside, I appreciated the fact that I didn't recognise any of the supporting cast. Some of them are familiar, as they're character actors notching up another entry in their sizeable filmographies, but I couldn't identify them and that works well when the characters they're playing are cops. In particular, Leland Orser, who seems highly recognisable, has a long string of credits to his name from which I failed to recognise him. He's in all three *Taken* movies, as well as genre pictures such as *The Bone Collector*, *Alien: Resurrection* and *Piranha*, as well as blockbusters like *Saving Private Ryan*, *Independence Day* and *Daredevil*. Ironically, he was in *Se7en* too, as "Crazed Man in Massage Parlor". Robert Joy, who plays Greg Wingate, the FBI profiler, was a *CSI: New York* regular, which utterly slipped my

mind at the time. His fifty or so features include titles as varied as *Ragtime*, *Waterworld* and *Harriet the Spy* and he's almost racked up a hundred TV show credits. Both are precisely what their roles required, being highly talented actors without star power enough to overwhelm their characters.

Even Christopher Lambert, whose diction is as recognisable as his face, manages to immerse himself far enough into this picture that we start to forget that he's a star. For all that *Se7en* does what it does better than *Resurrection*, we're never quite able to forget that we're watching Morgan Freeman, Brad Pitt and Kevin Spacey as much as the characters they play. Even when we dip into the supporting characters, the same often applies. Barbara Tyson is more believable as Sara Prudhomme than ever Gwyneth Paltrow was as Tracy Mills, not because she's better but because we don't recognise her. The same goes for Peter MacNeill and R. Lee Ermey; the latter is inherently recognisable but the former isn't.

Ironically, that may be partly why *Resurrection* flew under the radar in 1999, four years after *Se7en* shocked us all. It's inherently less recognisable and less memorable, but that's actually a really good reason to watch it. It also has much that's worthy of praise and deserves not to vanish into the black hole of capable movies that people continue to overlook. So, on any Easter you care to designate, on whichever date on which you choose to celebrate it, *Resurrection* deserves a resurrection.







## 4/20 MASSACRE (2018)

4/20

Director: Dylan Reynolds

Writer: Dylan Reynolds

Stars: Jamie Bernadette, Vanessa Reynolds, Stacey Danger, Justine Wachsberger, Marissa Pistone, Mark Schroeder, Drew Talbert, Jim Round, James Gregory and James Storm

Holidays come in all shapes and sizes and, as marijuana takes over from nicotine as the go to drug for Americans, 4/20 is becoming an important one and, with stoners a traditional element of slasher movies, I'm rather surprised that nobody's shot a horror flick set on this date before.

I'm happy that the first turned out to be Dylan Reynolds, director of the excellent *Nipples & Palm Trees*, as he's not the usual candidate for this sort of picture and he brings something a little different to the table. In many ways, this isn't really a horror movie at all, even if it does feature such a quintessential horror story as a bunch of young adults going camping in the woods, where they're picked off one by one by a silent maniac who's credited as the Shape, in a nod to John Carpenter's *Halloween*. At heart, it's much more of a character-driven drama that merely happens to boast a gruesome death scene every quarter of an hour, as if by clockwork. Only as the count of living people in the woods decreases to three—c'mon, you were expecting everyone to live in a picture called *4/20 Massacre*?—does it really become a traditional horror movie.

Reynolds, who wrote and directed, clearly understands the conventions of slasher movies and is happy, at points, to cater to their time-honoured traditions. Mostly, however, he's happy to avoid them. For instance, the folk he has traipse up four miles of trails to reach their remote campsite are odd in number, meaning that not everyone is going to pair up for the inevitable fooling around. I hope I don't put any potential viewers off this movie by pointing out that he gives us precisely zero scenes of people

having sex in tents. We don't even see any boobs, even though all five of these campers are female, thus avoiding a few more clichés.

They're in the woods to celebrate Jess's birthday, which is on 4/20—or, for my fellow Brits, 20/4, which just doesn't sound as catchy—but Jess isn't particularly fond of the weed; she explains to her friends that it makes her paranoid. It's Donna who's the traditional stoner and she's ecstatically happy when the plot almost literally runs into them on the way up the hill to the campsite.

You see, in the pre-credits sequence, a pair of young idiots are planning to steal from an illegal marijuana farm in this unnamed national forest somewhere in California. They know they'll be stealing from criminals, of course, but Dug—without an O—believes that this is perfectly acceptable opportunism. They find what they're looking for, at a perfect time too—the crooks have been harvesting and plenty of weed is already packaged and ready to go. So they load it up into Buddy's rucksack and... well, the forest comes alive in the form of some sort of camouflaged ninja and that's it for Dug.

He's sliced right across the throat and his buddy Buddy promptly runs away in terror. After those opening credits, he runs into the girls and, in an intelligent move that turns out to not help him in the slightest, he hands them his backpack full of freshly harvested drugs. "You're all next," he tells them. Well, they're not, of course; he is. The monster drops out of a tree he unwisely pauses beneath and slices his stomach open. Buddy tries to stuff his intestines back in, but I'm not sure that's ever worked.

So, all the men we've met in this picture, except for Ranger Rick, who warns the girls to "stay out of them damn hills" because the guerrilla growers in these hills aren't "old hippy farts" but "cold blooded gangsters running a business", have now been murdered in cold blood. We're left with one authority figure who exits stage left and five young ladies with a heroic quantity of stolen weed that we know is being hunted. We're set not only for at least another four death scenes—yes, Reynolds panders to one tradition and leaves us a final girl—but a horror movie that might just pass the Bechdel test.

In fact, it doesn't just pass the Bechdel test, but the Mako Mori test, the Sphinx test and the Vito Russo test, all of which you should read up on, along with probably a bunch of others. It's notably ironic that such a film was written by a man, but special kudos to Reynolds for populating his movie with women and daring, shock horror, to treat them like they're human beings. Noting that this really shouldn't be at all notable ironically highlights just how notable it is.

And I should introduce these ladies.

Jess is the birthday girl and she's played by Jamie Bernadette who's not a horror icon yet, but may well become one based on films like this and *I Can Spit on Your Grave: Deja Vu*. She certainly ought to know how that works because she made *Axeman at Cutter's Creek* with two of the more prominent modern day scream queens, Tiffany Shepis and Brinke Stevens. She does a very good job here, both as a scared victim and as a tough chick who isn't going to take any more.

Aubrey is an old friend who wants to be something more than than an old friend, which makes Vanessa Reynolds an interesting casting choice, given that she married the film's male director in 2012.

I'm not entirely sure if Rachel and Michelle are a couple as the story begins or whether the former merely plans to seduce the latter during the trip, but they're two more lesbian characters, which means that over half



the leads are LGBT in outlook. And I know you're imagining a Skinemax Spring Break movie right now with boobs a plenty but you need to get out of that mindset because that's not what you're going to get.

That leaves Donna, the traditional stoner chick, who is the least of the five but the one who grounds the picture with background on why 4/20. Oddly, she's also in *The 420 Movie: Mary & Jane*, a comedy featuring a "three foot tall Mexican drug lord", presumably played by Verne Troyer, so she's either an expert on the subject or a victim of typecasting.

Certainly, she doesn't dig too deep into the history of 4/20, which dates back to 1971 and five high school students called the Waldos, who planned to follow a treasure map in a search for an abandoned marijuana crop. No, that's not the unproduced adult sequel to *The Goonies*, it was an real group of students at the San Rafael High School in San Rafael, California—one went on to become a roadie for the Grateful Dead—who traditionally met at 4:20 p.m. by the Louis Pasteur statue on campus. This odd beginning grew, through an odd deification of the Waldos in *High Times* magazine, into what Vivian McPeak of Hempfest in Seattle calls "half celebration and half call to action." Donna certainly goes there.

She also raises another reason: balance. It seems that 20th April has seen so much negativity over the years that she firmly believes that "it's our collective duty to blaze up on this day" to redress the balance.



For a start, it's not just Jess's birthday, it's Adolf Hitler's too. Donna also mentions the Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961 and the Columbine High School massacre in 1999 (a real 4/20 Massacre) as other examples of bad jujū for the day, along with a couple of others that technically took place the day before: the ATF's infamous assault on the Branch Davidian compound in Waco in 1993 and the Oklahoma City bombing two years later. Why she didn't stick to events that actually happened on 4/20, I have no idea, as there really are a whole bunch of them, especially over the last century: the Ludlow Massacre, the murder of Jewish children at Neuengamme after medical experimentation, Enoch Powell's *Rivers of Blood* speech, a blowout on the Deepwater Horizon drilling rig, the shooting at the Johnson Space Center... how many do you need?

Anyway, Donna blazes up to "ward off all the bad vibes and evil spirits."

These five ladies have varying degrees of experience and I'm not aware of any instance of them working together before, but they show a lot of chemistry; and their dialogue, while not always clever, is acutely natural. Much of it feels improvised, but I have a feeling that it wasn't. The natural feel works really well with the natural location—this is the only feature film I can think of that doesn't show us a single building at any point; the closest we get are a couple of tents.

I liked all of them—the girls not the tents—albeit for different reasons, and I honestly can't remember a slasher movie in which I liked all the characters; usually there are at least a few that I want to die slow and painful deaths just as payment for being so frickin' annoying. Even Donna, as unlikely as it would be for she and I to hang out in real life, seems like a cool person to know. She's Stacey Danger, who started in *Channeling* and progressed to *The Neon Demon* and others. She was also a co-producer on this film, just as Vanessa Reynolds was a producer.

While all the actors are capable, I want to call out Jamie Bernadette and Marissa Pistone for special praise. The former isn't only a capable actress, she's also an excellent lead. Sure, she does exactly what her character needs to do on screen, especially late in the film when things get critical, but she's also the bedrock of the movie, both as a character and an actress.

It's Jess who's having that birthday, so providing the reason why they're being attacked in the woods by a camouflaged lunatic, but it's Bernadette who the other actors refer to. They may be melodies as they play out their subplots, but she's the riff at the heart of the movie that all of them have to come back to. Pistone doesn't have any of that grounding as Michelle, but she shines in quite a few scenes, including one where she appears to be more believably distraught than I've seen anyone in a horror movie, at least since *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, running away from the monster in ways that make no sense to us but, at that moment, bringing life to her sense of utter panic. She's most of the film's tension.

And here's where I point out that tension isn't what drives this feature. Reynolds may not have made a particularly horrific horror movie, but he does know the conventions and, when he hauls out his technique, he wields it well. Most of this ties to his use of the Shape, who does end up with a little explanation and a back story. There are some textbook shots where we see the Shape before the characters in frame do, or where he moves in just the right way or stands in just the right place. It's those points that show that Reynolds knows slasher flicks, but he's obviously far more interested in fleshing out characters than defleshing them.

All of which makes *4/20 Massacre* an odd hybrid of comedy, drama and slasher. I'd call it lighthearted, except that gives the wrong impression; it is absolutely lighthearted, but it's absolutely not fluff. We learn who these five ladies are, enough so that we're with them emotionally as they meet their inevitable demises. Normally, we cheer at death scenes. Here, other emotions come into play.

Another reason that we feel differently to normal is the score, which is as unlike what we expect from a slasher movie as everything else here. The music is by Sleeping Wolf (who are also advertised on Donna's T-shirt throughout) and Defoe. I don't know which is the twee pop band that reminded me a little of the Cardigans, but I was impressed with both bands, neither of which sound remotely like the usual trendy hip hop or nu metal blah. Their music makes us feel like we're there in the middle of nowhere with the girls, even if it doesn't make us feel like we're there in

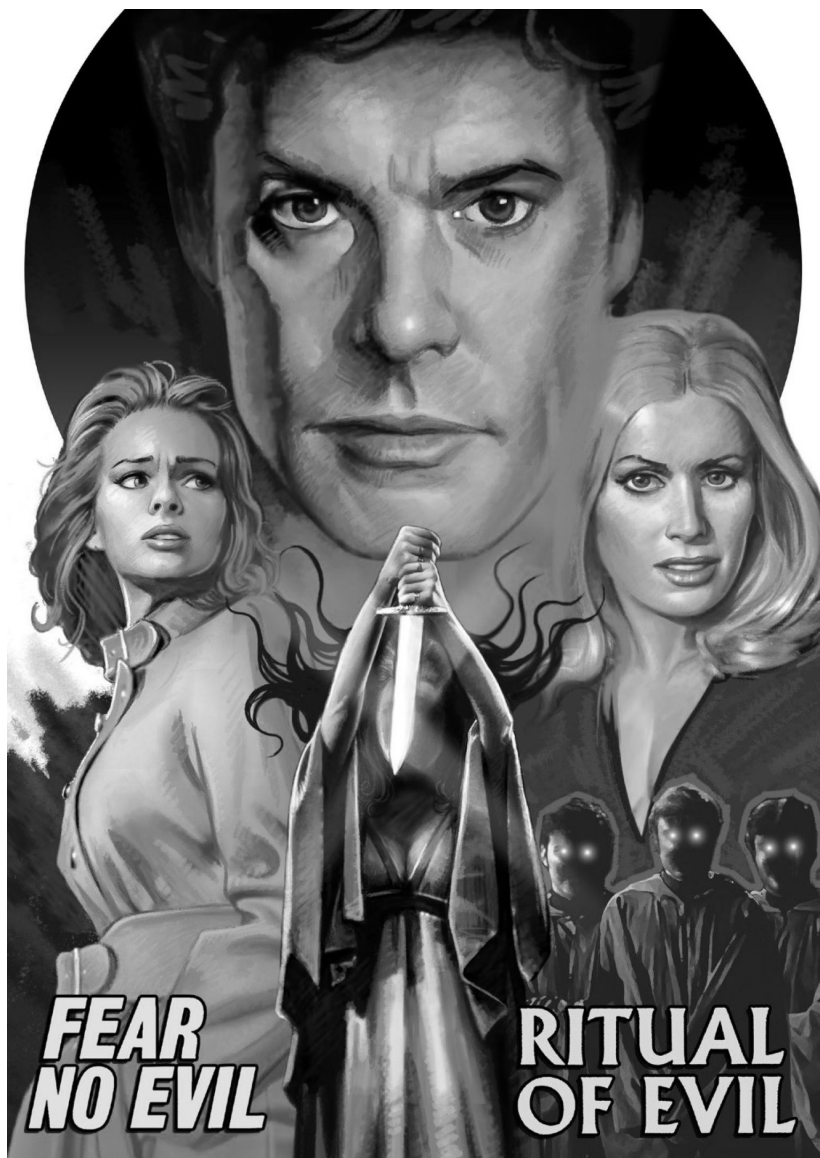
the middle of nowhere with a killer on the loose, at least until the last twenty or so minutes.

And here's the biggest problem the picture has: this merging of two apparently different genres is refreshing and I'll happily praise all of the character building, but the lack of tension does take some of the punch out of the horror side of things. As I would bet money that horror fans will pick this up in larger numbers than indie drama fans, that's likely to be a problem and it probably explains the 3.7 rating on IMDb.

Now, it could be that slasher addicts like it anyway. After all, the deaths are decent, especially the one that's most appropriate to the title, and the special make up effects by Brennan Jones are up to snuff, if you pardon the pun. If gorehounds can deal with lesbians chatting without taking their tops off, there's enough here to impress them, but they may be better off with a more traditional slasher like Devi Snively's *Trippin'*. On the flipside, drama fans are likely to appreciate the characters and the lack of clichés on offer but might love it more because the horror parts are likely to be a little more than they expect, so bringing a punch back into the picture.

"Gruesome bloodthirsty shit," a rare male character says at one point, and that's what this would be to a viewer who hasn't grown up on endless *Friday the 13th* sequels. *4/20 Massacre* is a decent picture, especially given its overt lack of budget, but it's probably not what most viewers will expect. Given that, I hope it finds an audience.







## RITUAL OF EVIL (1970)

### *Walpurgisnacht*

Director: Robert Day

Writer: Robert Presnell, Jr., based on characters by Richard Alan Simmons

Stars: Louis Jourdan, Anne Baxter, Diana Hyland, John McMartin, Belinda Montgomery and Wilfrid Hyde-White

Many of the films that I've included in this book are obscure, but for a variety of reasons. Some were independent releases that didn't reach a big audience. Some have been unjustly neglected by critics and the public. Some of them, let's be honest here, just plain suck. This TV movie may have merely arrived a blink of the eye too early to have the impact that it could have had, meaning that, instead of spawning a cult television show as it ought to have done, it became instead a historical footnote for half a century, just aching to be rediscovered.

It's actually a sequel, to 1969's *Fear No Evil*, which introduced us to a psychiatrist named David Sorell, played by the ever-reliable Louis Jourdan, who reprises his role here. Sorell is also an expert on the occult and he investigates the strange and unusual. Both these films were broadcast on NBC during their *NBC World Premiere Movie* series of films made for TV, which tended to run longer and cost more than their many equivalents on other networks. The cast of each was stellar and *Ritual of Evil* even won a Primetime Emmy for cinematography, but the hoped for TV show never materialised.

Instead, they served as a notable influence at a time when supernatural horror was at a peak. Another investigator of the supernatural, journalist Carl Kolchak, showed up a couple of years later, with his history beginning on the TV movie *The Night Stalker*, an *ABC Movie of the Week*, in 1972 and *The Night Strangler* followed it a year later, the same year that William Peter Blatty's big screen adaptation of his 1971 novel, *The Exorcist*, brought the

terrors of the unknown into the mainstream. ABC promptly ordered a full series of *Kolchak: The Night Stalker* and, while it only lasted a single season, it was itself a primary influence on later shows like *The X-Files*.

Had *Fear No Evil* and *Ritual of Evil* been made just a couple of years later, perhaps Chris Carter would have been inspired by the cult investigations of David Sorell rather than those of Carl Kolchak. In a parallel universe not far adrift from ours, maybe he did, but here in our universe, we've had to make do with terrible quality nth generation bootleg VHS tapes thus far. The good news is that, after I wrote this review after watching a dismal quality grey market copy sourced from a home recording of the television broadcast, Kino Lorber finally released both films together on BluRay.

The name writer on *Fear No Evil* was Guy Endore, most remembered nowadays for his 1933 novel, *The Werewolf of Paris*, and a string of horror screenplays in the thirties, including *Mark of the Vampire*, *Mad Love* and *The Devil-Doll*. His Oscar nomination, of course, wasn't for some tawdry horror yarn but for the decidedly all American 1945 war film, *The Story of G.I. Joe*, which he co-wrote. However, he was at the end of his career and *Fear No Evil* was his final credit; he died less than a year after its broadcast, not able to contribute much at all to the screenplay. Instead, Richard Alan Simmons, another experienced writer whose credits date back to *The Lady Wants Mink* in 1953, handled most of the work and so it's his name that's credited on *Ritual of Evil* as the creator of the core characters, David Sorrell and his mentor, Harry Snowden, though the actual screenplay was penned by Robert Presnell, Jr. Presnell's career had begun on TV in 1952, though he quickly found success on film with the underrated Jack Palance thriller, *Man in the Attic*.

It begins with clear ambition for a TV movie sequel to a TV movie. The opening credits unfold during a storm while the steady camera of Lionel Lindon closes relentlessly in on a large beachfront property, alternately almost hidden in the darkness and brightly lit by flashes of lightning. The music by composer Billy Goldenberg is appropriately striking and, as we focus on a lady in a nightgown who's wandering around in a daze by a raging ocean rather like the cover girl for a gothic paperback, it shifts into

a weird choral style that's just as enjoyable as it is unusual. And, while this torrential downpour gets worse, Dr. David Sorell drives up to the house to be greeted by a drunken Anne Baxter carrying a candelabra because the power's out. She's Jolene Wiley and she's worried about "Walpurgis Night with the demons walking around." She tells Sorell of a dream, of her niece Aline and some black magic ritual. "I think I'm going mad," she tells him. "Want a drink?" And then she passes out. Sorell lifts her onto the bed and kisses her cheek, even though he's just Aline's shrink. Well, it was 1970.

Where we go won't seem too surprising to those who already know about Walpurgis Night. It's the night before the Gaelic festival of Beltane, as spring transitions into summer, making it the equivalent of Hallowe'en, the night before the Gaelic festival of Samhain, when autumn transitions into winter. The two are exactly half a year apart and Walpurgis Night and Hallowe'en mark the two points in the year when the veil separating the world of the living and the realm of the dead is at its thinnest, making it a perfect setting for the horror genre, especially after Goethe popularised in *Faust* the idea that Walpurgisnacht was the time when witches congregate on Brocken, the highest of the Harz Mountains in Germany, to revel with the Devil. The date only grew as a setting from there, especially in art, which features myriad woodcuts of witches on Walpurgisnacht, frolicking around with evil intent. Bram Stoker's short story, *Dracula's Guest*, follows an unnamed Englishman—generally assumed to be Jonathan Harker—who finds himself caught in Transylvania on Walpurgis Night.

Most European countries follow some sort of tradition for warding off evil, whether it be the hanging of cowslips in England or the burning of effigies in the Czech Republic, bonfires being a common thread across the



continent. It's an especially important day in Finland, where it ranks with Christmas Eve, New Year's Eve and Midsummer as one of the four primary holidays of the year, with a strong tradition both for carnival and ribald student activities.

To capitalise on the centuries old witchcraft association with witchcraft—Walpurgisnacht is sometimes known as Hexennacht, or Witches' Night—Anton LaVey founded his Church of Satan on that date in 1966 and dubbed it an important Satanic holiday, on which to honour those victimised by superstition. Ironically, given such dark connotations, Walpurgisnacht is named for a Christian saint, Walpurga, whose feast day falls the next day. She was English by birth but remembered as an abbess who converted a large amount of Germany and what's now France to Christianity during the 8th century.

So yeah, Sorell is surely going to get caught up in the shenanigans of witches, amongst American high society, and we're set up for something strange in those opening scenes. With Jolene Wiley passed out drunk, Sorell chats with her daughter, Loey, until she sees that her dog has died. He's old and she's been expecting it but, after covering Canute with his jacket, Sorell sits back on the couch to become captivated by a statue on



the table, whose eyes glow red and lull him into slumber. He wakes to find the room cleaned up, Canute's body gone and his jacket beside him on the couch, but the place otherwise empty. He wanders outside to look at the ocean, so that Lindon's camera can pull back in a glorious shot to show us just how huge this house is, with its gardens leading down to the cliffs. I'd certainly buy that for a dollar, even if, as we suspected, the corpse of Aline Wiley promptly shows up on the beach, discovered by a wandering folk musician, Larry Richmond, who's immediately suspected by the cops on no better grounds than his being black. Well, it was 1970.

Actor Georg Stanford Brown wasn't a minor name, Cuban born and notable for his acting in TV shows like *Roots* and films like *Stir Crazy*, for his direction of decades of episodes of television and for his long running marriage to Tyne Daly of *Cagney and Lacey* fame. He plays a singer here, a major one fallen on hard times: he earned a gold disc, but fell into drugs and went to jail. Now he's clean and Aline Wiley, heiress to the huge Wiley fortune, let him stay in a beach cottage so he could practice. He's let go when the cops realise that Aline had been on the sand for six hours before he found her, and we suddenly segue into a truly weird confession from Loey, who's sobbing in a stable when Sorell stops in for a chat.



“I killed Aline,” she tells him. “With magic.” She commanded a trio of demons to help her and now Aline’s dead. “But I didn’t mean it like that,” she adds because she honestly thought it was just a game. Actress Belinda Montgomery would go on to quite the career in TV movies, this being her first of many, but she’s still best known for playing Doogie Howser’s mum.

The big names, of course, start with Anne Baxter, who won an Oscar for *The Razor’s Edge* and was nominated for another for her role as the title character in *All About Eve*. Other successes on the big screen included *The Magnificent Ambersons*, for Orson Welles, *I Confess* for Alfred Hitchcock and *The Blue Gardenia* for Fritz Lang. This came towards the close of her film career, as she was switching to TV; she found success there over another decade and a half, wrapping up a notable career with a long run in *Hotel*.

Her screen love interest here, Edward Bolander, is played by one of those actors you just know had to have had a career in soap operas. He’s John McMartin and his soaps were *As the World Turns* and *Falcon Crest*, though he was also a reliable supporting actor in film.

Dr. Sorell’s mentor, Harry Snowden, is played by the quintessentially English Wilfrid Hyde-White, a favourite of mine from a whole slew of British films from the fifties. I don’t know if I prefer the sparkle in his eye



in *The Third Man*, *Carry On Nurse* or *Two Way Stretch*.

The most important name in the cast, though, is Diana Hyland, because she's the key to the whole thing and it doesn't take us too long to figure that out. She plays Leila Barton, a photographer friend of Aline's who's clearly doing well for herself given the expensive sports car she's driving. She's also blessed with a sultry voice and she knows just how to use it to great effect, which she does quickly with Sorell.

Meanwhile, Loey keeps dreaming her dark dreams, surreal, ritual and orgiastic, and so does Richmond, who talks about incantations and mumbo jumbo and explains how Aline was able to call out demons.

While we wait to find out who the witch will be, our list of one is soon confirmed when Leila frankly owns up to it. Sorell visits her at her studio and picks up a book on the black arts. "I'm devoted to them," she tells him. "I'm a witch." And, from that point, this turns into a sort of battle of wits with the story developing around it, albeit one wrapped up in romance. We're yet to learn about the how and why behind all this but the who is never in question. Well, it was 1970.

What fascinates me is how we interact with the supernatural through Dr. David Sorell. He's a psychiatrist, a man of science, who's aware that there's a natural explanation for everything. "Demons are our own desires in disguise," as he tells his mentor. However, like every episode of *Kolchak*, in which Carl Kolchak encounters something supernatural and believes in it absolutely without ever being able to prove its existence (or write about it), Sorell has his own encounters with the supernatural in these two films, but do they go beyond his scientific ability to explain? Is this one really about witchcraft and resurrection and dream seduction, not to forget the ancient god of lust, Priapus? Or is it, as they say, all in the mind, just the product of irrational fear? What really happened at the Wiley party on Walpurgisnacht? From half a century of hindsight, it feels rather like this is an artistic collision of the staid rationality of the fifties, the psychedelic experimentation of the sixties and, most overtly, the supernatural horror of the seventies, which makes for a heady mix.

The biggest problem the film has is that psychiatrists are passive: they

don't so much cure us as gently prod us in the directions we need to take in order to cure ourselves and that's kind of what happens here. Sorell is ever-present, almost one of the family at the Wileys' house; he asks the odd question here and there but, even more often, just offers a friendly presence, a shoulder to cry on or a helpful word, so that whoever's there with him opens up about something. The most active he feels is when he goes to see his mentor for advice or to act as a sounding board, because then he's not reflecting someone else's ideas; he's throwing out his own to see what Snowden thinks about them. The most tense scene in the film isn't a fight or a chase or even an exhumation, it's the point towards the finalé as Sorell's driving from A to B and trying not to fall asleep, because he's being psychically attacked. It's very appropriate and it's a good scene, but it's hardly a great example of action cinema. Well, it was 1970.

I'd love to have seen more from the double act of Dr. David Sorell and Harry Snowden. I stumbled onto Jourdan late in his career, in films like *Swamp Thing* and *Octopussy*, and only gradually went back to discover just how long he'd been making movies. He was a veteran, even in 1970, with a career that went back to 1939 with a series of pictures in his native France. His first American film was *The Paradine Case*, for Alfred Hitchcock, and he'd prove massively versatile, starring in features as varied as *Letter from an Unknown Woman*, *Gigi* and *The Story of the Count of Monte Cristo*, even playing a warrior chief in the Italian fantasy *Amazons of Rome*, appearing opposite Sylvia Sims.

That versatility is just what a character like Sorell needs. He's boring at points, always the traditional one in a room full of edgy characters from the counterculture, but he's adventurous at others, kind and daring, both willing and able to do what must be done. He has wit and knowledge and I think that would have translated well into the show that never happened, whatever it would have been called. For now, we can rewatch *The Night Stalker* for the twentieth time and think about what else could have been.



*A Horror Movie Calendar*



**Flesh to touch...  
Flesh to burn!  
Don't keep the Wicker Man waiting!**

A TOTALLY  
CORRUPT  
SHOCKER  
FROM THE  
AUTHOR OF  
"SLEUTH"  
AND  
"FRENZY"!



ANTHONY SHAFFER'S  
**THE  
WICKER  
MAN**

Starring  
"THE WICKER MAN": EDWARD WOODWARD · BRITT EKLAND · DIANE CILENTO · INGRID PITT  
and CHRISTOPHER LEE as Lord Summerisle Produced by PETER SNELL · Directed by ROBIN HARDY · Screenplay by ANTHONY SHAFFER

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## THE WICKER MAN (1973)

*Beltane*

Director: Robin Hardy

Writer: Anthony Shaffer, loosely adapted from the novel *Ritual* by David Pinner

Stars: Edward Woodward, Britt Ekland, Diane Cilento, Ingrid Pitt and Christopher Lee

It's a testament to the massive power of *The Wicker Man* that, however many horror movies you watch, it consistently stands alone. Frankly, that holds true even if you start dabbling in the vein that's become known as British folk horror, epitomised by *Witchfinder General*, *The Blood on Satan's Claw* and this picture, because the other two films are period pieces, while this was contemporary to 1973.

It's remembered very well, with its two primary stars praising it highly. Christopher Lee, whose long and distinguished career was a busy one for almost seventy years, remembered it as his very best film, above anything he did for *Star Wars*, *Lord of the Rings* or James Bond. Edward Woodward, best known as TV's *Equalizer*, described his lead role here as the best one he ever played and called out the ending as the best in film history. While received well at the time, however, it didn't dominate the box office and it had fallen into obscurity by the time *Cinefantastique* devoted an entire issue to the film in 1977, calling it "the *Citizen Kane* of horror movies".

While it's well known today, I felt that I had to choose it for this project because it's inextricably entangled in pagan folklore and it ends on May Day, which long before its adoption in 1889 as International Workers' Day, which in turn led to those iconic demonstrations of Soviet military might during the Cold War, was a traditional spring holiday across much of the continent of Europe. It dates back to Roman times and the festival of Flora and there are plenty of rituals in this film that evoke Gaelic celebrations of Beltane, such as naked young women jumping over a sacred flame as part

of their “divinity lessons”; they’re trying to get pregnant not through sex but through parthenogenesis. Also here is a scene that’s focused around a maypole but, unlike the family friendly version still celebrated in towns across England, this one is a clear phallic symbol, which Miss Rose teaches the girls of Summerisle is “venerated in religions such as ours.” In fact, there’s so much here that I wouldn’t be surprised if someone’s written an entire folklore book to explain everything going on in *The Wicker Man*.

But I’m getting ahead of myself, because this isn’t just about paganism, it’s about how paganism might clash with Christianity in a country that technically still has a state religion. That’s the point at which the film’s origins were sparked. Christopher Lee wanted to take on more interesting horror roles, given the similarity of the parts he was getting at Hammer, and he chatted with Anthony Shaffer about making something happen.

Shaffer was a novelist and playwright who was building a serious name for himself in the movie business, having written both *Frenzy* and *Sleuth* a year earlier. Lee owned the film rights to *Ritual*, a novel by David Pinner, and that became a loose beginning for the script that became *The Wicker Man*. The overt combatants in this age old clash are Sgt. Neil Howie of the West Highland Police, a devout Christian who flies onto the remote island of Summerisle, west of mainland Scotland, to investigate a missing child, and the population of that island, led by Lord Summerisle himself, who freely states to Howie, “Here, the old gods aren’t dead.”

The script is a very clever one because what we think it is changes as the film progresses. Initially, it’s simply an investigation, triggered by an anonymous letter and photograph sent to Howie on the mainland, but it’s a strange one because nobody on the island seems to have heard of Rowan Morrison, including her supposed mother, May, who runs the local post office. While May’s daughter Myrtle tells Howie where Rowan is, it soon becomes clear that she’s talking about a hare rather than a girl. It’s at the local school that Howie breaks through this wall of silence by seeing Rowan’s name in the register, but this merely changes the investigation. Now it seems that Rowan is dead and has been for six or seven months, even if there’s no death certificate. He finds her grave, in a cemetery by a

ruined church, but, when he exhumes her body, he finds that it's another hare. It's a surreal investigation, to be sure, but we follow Howie as he goes about his business, Woodward upright both physically and spiritually as he stubbornly tries to do what's right.

And, while all that's going on, we can't fail to acknowledge that the locals clearly don't believe what Howie does. If we didn't notice the eye on the harbour master's boat that brings him in from his plane, we'll see the flag or the cakes in the post office. All the girls are named for flowers. The local pub, at which Howie finds lodging, is the Green Man, named for the ancient symbol of rebirth. There, he's almost assaulted by what he sees as degeneracy: the locals bawdily sing the praises of the landlord's daughter and his lordship brings a young man to spend the night with her as an offering to Aphrodite; a host of couples rut together in the fields outside; and there's even a naked woman weeping on top of a grave. Of course, he's seeing all this from the perspective of a devout Christian, which is perhaps expected on the western islands, where the shops still don't always open on Sundays, even after the UK relaxed its laws in 1994 to allow it. Clearly, the people of Summerisle don't share the same perspective and their focus coming up to May Day is on fertility.

Every time I watch *The Wicker Man*, in one of the various incarnations of it that have been released over the years, I tend to discover something



new. This time, I believe I grasped the meaning of the beetle scene, which I always knew had to mean something but hadn't quite figured out what until now. This happens in Miss Rose's classroom, part of the scene when Howie first discovers Rowan's name in the register. The one empty desk is surely hers, so he rushes over to open it and, inside, is a beetle attached by a piece of string to a nail. The girl one desk over explains that the beetle always circles the nail in the same direction, meaning that it eventually gets tight up to it, unable to move further. Now it seems obvious to me that she's mocking Howie, whose rigid belief in Jesus closes his mind to anything else so rendering him predictable and easy to manipulate down the only path he's able to take. Perhaps, if the good sergeant had figured out the lesson of the beetle and the nail, he might have been able to get inside the mindset of the locals earlier, closed the case sooner and even made it home to his loving fiancée.

Of course, he doesn't, and that sets him on his inexorable course to the finalé, which I want to avoid but don't believe I can, given that it's both an iconic moment in cinematic history and almost half a century old now, not to mention that it was rather spoiled by the film's own poster. If you don't know where it's going to end up, having seen that, I'm really not the spoiler here.

However, knowing where we end up and what the title means, is only



part of the puzzle and, while it makes for gorgeous imagery, it's not the point and I can safely avoid that, so you can get rooked between the eyes with it at precisely the right moment.

A host of details lead to it being particularly powerful and, while some of them are indelibly tattooed on my memory, others return afresh with each new viewing, so I'll behave. Let's suffice with a suggestion that the ending shouldn't be too surprising if we've watched the movie with the open mind that Sgt. Howie doesn't have and tried to see everything from the perspective of the locals and their obviously pagan beliefs. While we may not be experts on pagan folklore, we don't have to be, as some of this is made clear early on. For instance, once Rowan's name is discovered in the register, Howie asks Miss Rose if the girl is dead. "You would say so," she replies. The people of Summerisle believe in reincarnation rather than death. That flavours everything.

And, especially in Scotland, it flavours the holiday on which *The Wicker Man* ends. Beltane, the Gaelic May Day festival, is one of the four seasonal festivals, along with Imbolc, Lughnasadh and Samhain, the latter of which has become rather popular in a number of countries as Hallowe'en.

Beltane happens halfway between the spring equinox and the summer solstice and is traditionally seen as the beginning of summer, the day on which cattle were driven out to their summer pastures, often in between special bonfires. Fire is a huge deal on May Day, when all household fires would be doused and relit from the Beltane bonfire. The more you know about Beltane and other rituals of May Day, the more you're going to see through the plotting involved to get this film to its finalé. Again, I won't spoil the ending, but it's pretty clear both from the poster and the tagline above the titular image that fire is going to play a major part. "Flesh to touch... Flesh to burn! Don't keep the Wicker Man waiting!"

*The Wicker Man* is packed full of wonderful things to appreciate and I do hope that discerning fans of horror find it sooner rather than later and, by the way, also resist the urge to check out the universally panned remake of the same name, starring Nicolas Cage, about which I'll happily say no more. I'd call Shaffer's script the pinnacle of his career, knowing full well

that he had only just adapted his play, *Sleuth*, into a very clever film, and much of what I've said above speaks to why.

There's a point late in the film when Howie chases through the town and encounters a whole host of little details that Shaffer doesn't have time to explore at depth. I've heard of John Barleycorn and hands of glory and the Salmon of Knowledge, but I didn't know much, if anything, about them when I first watched this film. I love the locations too, which aren't all on a real island called Summerisle, whatever the note at the beginning of the Director's Cut might suggest, but are from all over the UK, from Culzean Castle in Ayrshire to Wookey Hole in Somerset.

One of the critical components is the music, because, even though this might sound surprising, this is a musical as well as a horror movie. It's just that, unlike almost every other musical in existence, the music and the songs bring additional meaning to what's going on in the story. Often it's ritual in nature, such as the glorious *Maypole Song* which accompanies the winding of ribbons, or the chant heard as girls leap over the sacred flame inside the stone circle outside Lord Summerisle's castle. There's rarely a procession or a ritual that does not come accompanied by music of some description. Sure, the locals at the Green Man sing and play instruments because that's part of Gaelic pub culture but there are deeper meanings to explore too. Their rendition of *The Landlord's Daughter* is primarily a dig at Sgt. Howie and his prudish Christian beliefs, because it clearly pisses him off. Later music from downstairs accompanies a song upstairs by that very landlord's daughter, as she tries a sort of remote seduction of Howie in the room next door, which he staves off with prayer.

And, of course, there's the acting. The majority of it seems very natural, as if the casting director just signed up whoever happened to live in the locations that had been chosen in which to shoot. Certainly the musicians, credited as Magnet, weren't a band prior to this, being formed specifically for the purpose of recording the soundtrack. An impressive percentage of the cast is made up of children, especially for a feature unafraid to delve into the skyclad aspects of paganism, though everyone who gets naked is an adult. The kids do a fantastic job, never seeming to giggle at the adult



nature of what's going on around them. Edward Woodward is perfect as Sgt. Howie, his righteous indignation apparent from his first scenes but intensifying through to the finalé, which is all the more shocking for his reaction to it. Christopher Lee is also superbly cast, however dubious some of his seventies outfits happen to be. He's loose but knowing, a strong leader but one perfectly willing to don a *Ringu*-esque wig and dress up as the traditional man/woman in the final procession.

There are also a number of strong women in the cast deserving of mention, because you surely can't explore fertility rites without women. The most obvious, of course, is Britt Ekland, a Swedish sex symbol who was famously married to Peter Sellers. She plays Willow MacGregor, the landlord's lusty daughter, though she didn't create the entire role: her speaking voice was dubbed by Annie Ross and her singing voice by Rachel Verney, while she employed a body double for her nude dance scene, that remarkable rear view being that of Lorraine Peters, who was a nightclub dancer from Glasgow.

In a more important, if also more clothed role, Diane Cilento plays Miss Rose, the island's schoolteacher. She gets a few key moments at very different dramatic points in the movie and she's excellent in every one of them. At this point, she was semi-retired from a long and distinguished career and busy divorcing Sean Connery; she would eventually marry



Shaffer, who moved to Australia with her. That leaves the lovely Ingrid Pitt, who gets a much smaller role as the town registrar but still a notable one.

So, if you haven't seen the original version of *The Wicker Man*, what are you waiting for? It's easily in the top five horror movies of all time and is more than ready to duke it out with a few other notable classics for the top spot, such as *Psycho*, *The Exorcist* and *Bride of Frankenstein*. It's unlike pretty much every other horror movie out there, a rare distinction that's reserved for only a precious few, *Freaks*, *The Night of the Hunter* and *The Abominable Dr. Phibes* among them. It's a gateway drug of a movie, not just to what's becoming quite the genre nowadays, British folk horror, but even to musical genres like psychedelic folk too.

And, from the perspective of this project, it's surely the one movie in this book that's most inextricably entangled in the holiday on which it's set. Everything in this picture happens because it's coming up to May Day and an explanation of the holiday serves as a pretty decent introduction to the movie too.

So, if you're not convinced, let me underline my recommendation in red ink. Watch the Final Cut of *The Wicker Man* as soon as you can.



*A Horror Movie Calendar*





## CINCO DE MAYO (2013)

### *Cinco de Mayo*

Director: Paul Ragsdale

Writer: Paul Ragsdale

Stars: Anthony Iava To'omata, Angelica de Alba, Joshua Palafox, Tiawny Ferreira, Christopher Beatty, Lindsay Amaral, Kyle Duval, Tommy Fourre, Ryan Holley, Robert Holloway, Steven Pettit Jr., Pete Magazinovic, Delawna McKinney, Don Gonzalez and Spencer Reza

Not all holidays are English language holidays, even if half the people getting drunk on Cinco de Mayo have never spent a day in Mexico in their lives and whose command of the Spanish language doesn't extend past "uno más" and "por favor".

This feature, made because director Paul Ragsdale wanted to shoot a slasher movie, looked at holidays on the calendar and saw that there was a glaring gap on 5th May just waiting for a Mexican horror film, can't hide its tiny budget but does manage to do far more with it than I expected it might, especially as it progresses from a cheap beginning to a surprisingly poetic ending. It also veers quickly away from paths that I expected it to follow: while it did start out as a slasher, and it certainly follows some of the rules from that genre, it feels far more seventies than eighties with a strong social awareness angle that feels completely out of place in a world epitomised by Freddy and Jason. It's also predominantly told in English, though with a heavy Hispanic focus and with a little Spanish dotted here and there for flavour.

I have to say up front that the beginning is pretty awful, though I must also acknowledge that part of that is by design. Ragsdale decided to present *Cinco de Mayo* as the first half of a double bill showing on cable TV in a recurring segment called *All Nite Long*. This is truly embarrassing to my generation but only because it's so accurate. Eden Trevino does a great job of parodying Rhonda Shear from the Friday edition of *USA Up All Night*,

though in acknowledging that she clearly out-eighties her inspiration, I was shocked to find that Shear didn't take over the show from Caroline Schlitt until 1991, making this a seventies film in an eighties segment sourced from a nineties show. The rest of the awful is less easy to explain away. Everyone in the cast makes it into the opening credits, in a font bad enough for L to look like I and actors to look like typos. Tlawny Ferrelra? Maybe not. Then, when the film proper starts, with a brief prologue from a year earlier, it's really dark and it's difficult to see what's going on. Not a good beginning.

It could easily be argued that it keeps improving from that low point, though I'm not sure at what precise point I stopped laughing and started actually digging the film. It may well have been the conversation between a set of students about the fact that their Chicano History teacher, Prof. Humberto Valdez, has just been fired. On the surface, it seems entirely as stupid as you might expect from a bunch of college kids in a horror movie but, behind the stupidity, it's thoughtful, incisive and well written. Before this point, which starts around the eighteen minute mark, my notes were mostly about poor lighting, bad acting and worse camerawork. After it, they focused more on good ideas, strong dialogue and interesting angles to the script. The lighting never improves, but the acting surely does and the white bigots, in particular, are thoroughly believable. Ironically, one of the more prominent, Valdez's neighbour, Ted, is played by Kyle Duval, who Ragsdale previously cast as a character in love with a young Hispanic lady in a short film called *The Mexican Connexion*.

The slasher side of the story seems relatively simple: Valdez gets fired, so he goes on a killing spree. However, there's a lot more to that and, in many ways, Valdez and the movie are the same thing. As a character, he seems to exist only to impart his message, namely that Mexican culture extends a lot further than his students think.

When asking them about Cinco de Mayo, Cory gets enthusiastic but it's only because of "all the drinking, all the car racing, all the fights, getting shanked, chicks sitting on hoods and shit." Magdalena asks him later if he truly believes that gangs and prison are an important part of Mexican

culture. He replies, honestly, “Isn’t it?” So what their teacher, colloquially referred to as El Maestro, fails to get over in his class, starts to resonate both with his students and with us. Valdez’s message is really the message of the picture, so we start to think about some of his topics, such as: “What is Cinco de Mayo and what does it mean?” Well, it probably isn’t what you think, even if you think deeper than Cory.

For a start, Cinco de Mayo absolutely does not commemorate Mexican independence. That was achieved on 28th September, 1821, at the end of eleven years and eleven days of war with Spain and it’s celebrated on the most important national holiday in Mexico, Mexican Independence Day. However, that commemorates the beginning of that period rather than its end and is therefore celebrated on 16th September. That’s to specifically remember the Cry of Dolores, when Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla, a Roman Catholic priest, urged his people to revolt and they did exactly that.

Just as Mexican Independence Day is about the spirit of independence, as epitomised in the Cry of Dolores, Cinco de Mayo is far more important as a symbol than an actual event. It celebrates the victory at the Battle of Puebla in 1862 when the Mexican Army, against overwhelming odds, beat the army of France. The Mexicans numbered 4,000 poorly equipped men, while the French, sporting twice as many and much better equipment, hadn’t lost to anyone in half a century. However, they lost to the Mexicans



and that victory energized the people.

What's really odd, of course, is that most of Mexico doesn't actually celebrate Cinco de Mayo. While it used to be a national holiday, it isn't any more; it's only celebrated in the states of Puebla, in which the battle was fought, and Veracruz, its neighbour. It would seem that this massively important Mexican battle is honoured more in the U.S., where California has celebrated it continuously since 1863. It's as American a holiday as St. Patrick's Day.

Then again, North American history often gets tangled together in a strange weave without any regard for current political boundaries. The Mexican commander in the Battle of Puebla, as a prime example, was Gen. Ignacio Zaragoza, who was born in a little Mexican village by the name of Bahía del Espíritu Santo, which is now the town of Goliad, Texas, its name an anagram of Hidalgo, that priest who gave the Cry of Dolores, with the silent Spanish H omitted. The man who asked Padre Hidalgo to speak up was José Bernardo Gutiérrez de Lara, who declared an independent Texas in 1813, wrote its constitution and served as its first president. It only lasted a few weeks, but still. Sam Houston didn't show up until 1836.

Of course, that's all a century or two ago. *Cinco de Mayo* was released during the tenure of the 44th President of the United States, though I was watching during that of the 45th and it seems rather timely; frankly, this





movie could easily have been prescribed medically as catharsis during the Trump administration. Valdez is a Hispanic man, an imposing one too, and his actions, at least the initial ones he takes before his bloody rampage, are inspired by racial intolerance against Latinos. That extra-dark scene at the beginning unfolded one year prior, when two white men shot dead a young Hispanic man on the way home from a party, before dumping him by the Greaser Tree. Nothing racist there, right? Well, this particular town is populated by people like that. “I’m an American citizen,” Valdez tells racist Ted as a conversation turns round on him. “Liberal mumbo jumbo,” Ted replies. Rick, whose woman lusts after their greasy labourer, plans to mark Cinco de Mayo by driving his truck, flying his flag and blaring real music. None of that mariachi crap, he has Nickelback!

It’s hard not to side with the killer when he’s killing bigots and he has some interesting approaches too. You won’t be surprised, for instance, that he takes down Dean Liberstein, who fired him with prejudice. Initially we assume the dean is hanging from a noose because he’s being lynched, but no! Valdez has a baseball bat and he’s going to treat him like a piñata.

Frankly, Ragsdale should have left it there but, possibly inspired by *Welcome Home, Brother Charles*, he adds a half-baked conspiracy theory to explain why a mild-mannered professor will suddenly explode with “Aztec blood lust”. It’s not a worthy angle, but it does allow school counsellor, Dr.



Harry Love, to explain to the town sheriff that millions of other Americans are suffering from Aztec blood lust. I can see the daytime talk shows now. Ring this number if you too have Aztec blood lust! Don't be shy; millions of others suffer from the same condition. Now, over to Dr. Oz, who's come up with some snake oil to cure it. Oh, and here's a young mother whose child was vaccinated and—please, no!—now has Aztec blood lust!

I jest, of course, but the conspiracy theory angle is wildly overplayed, while the rest of the film is, if anything, downplayed. I'd initially felt that Spencer Reza and especially Pete Magazinovic were a little out of place as the dean and the counsellor but, once I saw what they were setting up, I understand why they overdid it all so much. Fortunately, that's a minor aspect, perhaps serving primarily to explain why this picture seeks equal treatment for Mexicans by allowing them to be serial killers just like us repressed white guys.

To really understand this, we have to pay attention to what Prof. Valdez reads during the film, a book that also mysteriously shows up in Dr. Love's office, as if it wants us to pay particular attention to it. It's *Joaquin Murieta*, by John Rollin Ridge, an 1854 dime novel whose original title, *The Life and Adventures of Joaquin Murrieta, The Celebrated California Bandit*, hints at his stature as a sort of Mexican Robin Hood. Johnston McCulley may well have used that book, and Murieta's nephew, as inspiration for Don Diego de la



Vega, better known as Zorro.

Murieta was real, but what's known of him is so anecdotal that half it is probably made up and the other half is really a construct of a few different people. The general theme is that he was a Mexican miner, working a rich claim in California during the Gold Rush, who suffered a set of indignities in quick succession: Anglos drove him from his mine, then raped his wife, lynched his half-brother and, if that wasn't enough, horse-whipped him for good measure. No wonder he became a bandit. No wonder, also, that the revenge that he quickly obtained and the brigandry that followed built his name as a folk hero.

Clearly, Valdez, who mentions in the movie that Murieta's gang hid out in the vicinity, sees him that way and it's not surprising that he takes Murieta's identity during the finalé. I must add here also that when the California State Rangers were created in order to hunt Murieta (and four other Joaquins), they were led by a man called Capt. Harry Love, the name given here to the school counsellor who sparks the whole thing.

So, there's much to praise here, even in a film with so much to decry.

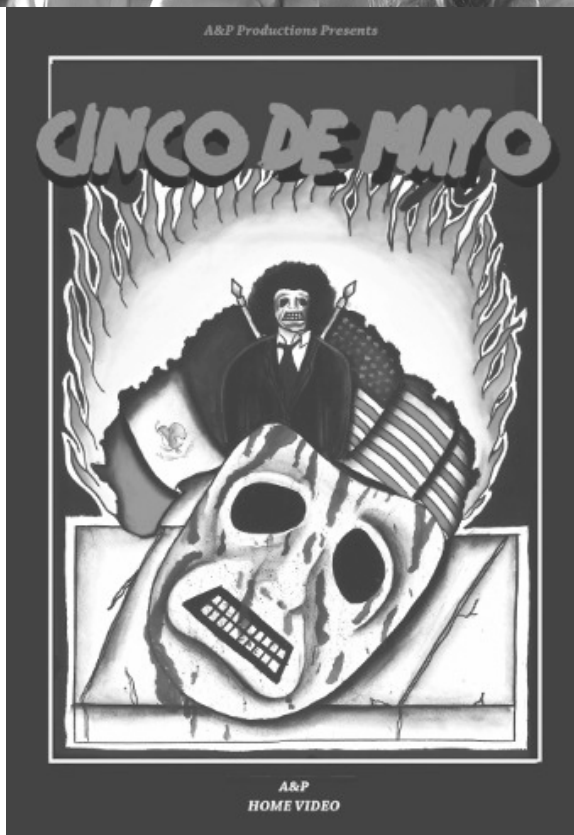
I liked the *All Nite Long* homage, with Stacy Monroe introducing *Cinco de Mayo* by posing in spandex against neon backdrops and acting all giddy. What I didn't like was the trailer she shows us for the picture supposedly playing next. That's *Dance Til You Die*, which pits dancers against zombies



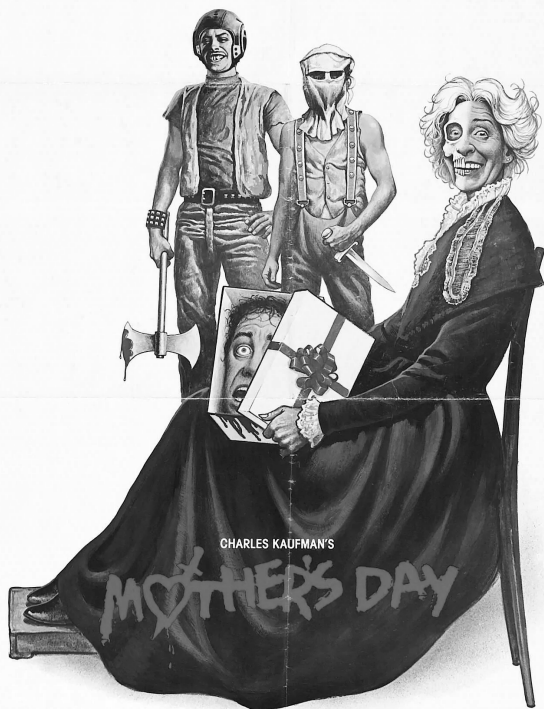
and might seem like a good idea but really turns out not to be. Beyond not playing like a trailer in the slightest, it's even more low budget than *Cinco de Mayo* and, even though I often get a kick out of low budget schlock, I'd certainly be switching off *All Nite Long* at 1am right before *Dance Til You Die* comes on.

By the way, I have to call out the music for a similar mix of positive and negative. There's some great stuff playing here, including some really cool John Carpenter-esque eighties synth by a Mexican musician by the name of Vestron Vulture, but there's no overarching theme to it all. It's just cool bits here and other cool bits there, with some less cool bits in between. There's no flow.

Really, what you get out of this film is going to depend on what you're looking for. Low budget movie mavens aren't likely to care about the poor lighting and poor camerawork; at least the sound is good and that's more important. Film fans generally will find a lot of things to complain about, but they may enjoy the surprising cultural depth for what appears to be a simple slasher movie. Slasher fans may want more kills than they get and they may find the finalé underwhelming, but the second half of the film does contain some fun death scenes. White supremacists need not apply, of course; they're likely to buy up copies and burn them in public, which would at least put some money in the pockets of Paul Ragsdale for future projects. The audience I'm not sure about is the likely one; I'd suggest that Hispanic Americans will enjoy this over cerveza but they may not care about the focus on their culture that the film wants to push. If they're the kids who walk out of El Maestro's class because they don't care, that may be their response here too. I hope not.



**"I'm so proud of my boys –  
they never forget  
their mama."**



CHARLES KAUFMAN'S

**MOTHER'S DAY**

"MOTHER'S DAY" • Produced by MICHAEL KRAVITZ & CHARLES KAUFMAN • Directed by CHARLES KAUFMAN  
Starring NANCY HENDRICKSON • DEBORAH LUCE • TIANA PIERCE • HOLDEN McQUIRE • BILLY RAY McQUADE • ROSE ROSS  
Executive Producer ALEXANDER BECK • Production Executive RAY SUNDLIN • Associate Producers LLOYD KAUFMAN & MICHAEL HERZ  
Written by CHARLES KAUFMAN and WARREN D. LEIGHT • Music by PHIL GALLO and CLEM VICARI • Edited by DANIEL LOWENTHAL  
Production Design SUSAN KAUFMAN • Director of Photography JOE MANGINE • Color by TVC • Equipment by Cinecam, Inc.  
Released by United Film Distribution Co.

This picture contains scenes of a violent nature.  
No one under 17 will be admitted unless accompanied by an adult.

## MOTHER'S DAY (1980)

*Mother's Day*

Director: Charles Kaufman

Writers: Charles Kaufman and Warren Leight

Stars: Holden McGuire, Billy Ray McQuade, Rose Ross, Nancy Hendrickson, Deborah Luce and Tiana Pierce

Disclaimer: at no moment in this film does anyone actually confirm that its events are taking place on Mother's Day, making it something of a cheat for this project, but I have my reasons.

For one, at no moment in this film does anyone say that its events *aren't* taking place on Mother's Day. For two, the subtext of the movie, which digs deep into consumerism and blindly rewarding mothers, regardless of whether they're worthy, is perfect for a modern consumerist holiday such as Mother's Day. And, for three, while Troma Studios, that bastion of low budget independent filmmaking, produced this picture themselves, they also distributed a later homage in *Father's Day*, which absolutely has ties to its titular holiday.

In other words, if this film isn't set on Mother's Day, it ought to be, and, quite frankly, every other consumerist holiday on the calendar should be commemorated in a film made by Troma too. I ought to start a petition to have them tackle Valentine's Day and Grandparents' Day, Black Friday and Prime Day, and especially Singles Day.

If you don't know Troma, I should introduce you. Troma Entertainment was founded in 1974 by Lloyd Kaufman and Michael Herz who specialise in making and distributing low budget films. No, that's not enough, because lots of companies do that; Troma do it in a very particular way. By low budget, I mean *really* low budget, to the degree that sometimes there's *no* budget. Traditional attributes like the ability of actors to act or scripts to make sense are far from priorities, but the abilities to shock, scare and ick out are. Many of the most disgusting, most outrageous and most offensive

movies ever shot were either made or distributed by Troma and what's crucial is that the company would take those descriptions as compliments; they might even throw them onto their DVD covers as quotes, in luminous lime green over a splatter of diarrhoea. And, with that unwelcome image stuck in your brain, I'll point out that this film, as disgusting, outrageous and offensive as it is, is surprisingly well made and it's worthy of much critical comment.

It was, I believe, only the second movie that Troma made themselves, following a sex comedy called *Squeeze Play!*, and the director and co-writer was Kaufman's brother, Charles, who demonstrates plenty of imagination here. Sure, it looks like a slasher movie and, to a large degree it is, but it's neither just a slasher movie nor one that follows the rules of its genre, partly because they hadn't all been put down on celluloid yet. Ironically, it was shot in New Jersey at the same time as *Friday the 13th* and the lake that we see in the movie, Fairview Lake in Stillwater, NJ, is the same one that's so memorable as Crystal Lake in the more famous picture.

This one is also a rape-revenge flick and a backwoods hillbilly horror, though it doesn't follow the rules of either of those genres either. It's even torture porn, long before anyone named that genre. And, at heart, it's not really horror at all, because it's fundamentally a satire. In some ways, it's notably ahead of its time, surely one reason why contemporary reviewers





despised it, but it also plays as a video nasty era throwback to the Grand Guignol. It goes wildly over the top to make social comment, so far that we laugh aloud or squeeze our eyes shut and miss what Kaufman and his co-writer and later Pulitzer Prize-nominee, Warren Leight, just pulled.

They start by playing with expectations, setting us up for one thing but then giving us another. For instance, we begin by panning across a room of passive very seventies faces, with mildly ominous synth music floating behind them. Then Kaufman springs on us that they're a graduating class of Ernie's Growth Opportunity, or EGO, a self help group that's a parody of Erhard Seminars Training, or EST, which was popular at the time, though some critics labelled it a cult. Ernie has everyone kiss their neighbour and say, "Thank you for sharing with me. I love you." Then we follow three graduates: a pair of young hippies, who need a ride to the bus station, and an old lady in a neckbrace, who's happy to oblige. As she drives into the countryside, Charlie plays with his garotte and we know that they're going to kill their benefactor. But, as the car breaks down, two grotesque men spring out of nowhere to decapitate Charlie and we realise that the old lady's in charge. "Thank you for sharing with me," she tells the girl. "I love you." And then strangles her to death.

Yes indeed, Mother, who is given no other name in this film, lives in the woods with her pair of murderous sons, who kill, rape and maim for the



entertainment and approval of their beloved mother. Enter a trio of young ladies on a reunion trip and it doesn't take a heck of a lot of imagination to see where we're going. You've seen this sort of movie before, right?

Well, what's surprising is the amount of serious effort given to building the characters of these young ladies, because that never happens in this sort of movie. This starts during the opening credits, as the trio provide a running commentary to a literal slideshow highlighting all the fun they had together as roommates a decade earlier at Wolfbreath University. Yes, this is early enough that Kaufman apparently hadn't created Tromaville yet. These actresses, none of whom had acted in film before and none of whom did much again, bounce off each other perfectly and we honestly believe in this Rat Pack being so tight a group that they'll happily drop everything for their annual weekend reunion, always planned by one of them without the others knowing any details at all.

This time around, it's Jackie's turn to organise and her pick of mystery weekend is a camping trip to Deep Barons, somewhere in the woods of New Jersey. We can easily see the appeal of escape to these three. Trina may live in Beverly Hills, organising pool parties for the rich and famous, but they're clearly a drag and she craves real companionship. Abbey takes care of her abusive mother in Chicago, who would drive a saint nuts. "I'm a sick woman!" she screams, like a mantra, and Abbey's eager to get out of



there, even if only for a weekend. Jackie lives in New York and has terrible choice in men. “I’d work 9 to 5 if I could,” her current one says, snorting coke and stealing money out of her purse, secure in the knowledge that he never will. “I love you,” she says tentatively, before opening the door, and he completely fails to notice. At this point, the Drexburg Bus Terminal is a step up for each of them and the countryside that follows is gorgeous, even if Trina and Abbey can’t see it because Jackie makes them put bags over their heads to maintain the surprise. That makes for fun times at the backwoods grocery.

Even though I’ve seen this film more than once, there are points here where I completely forget I’m watching a horror movie. The Rat Pack are so natural together that I’m caught up in the reminiscences. Who could forget Brad “Call Me Dobber” Dobson, Jackie’s crush who, of course, only wants one thing from her? She set up a date on the pitcher’s mound but wandered off to get the body oil while he strips off to *I Think We’re Alone Now* by Tommy James & The Shondells. He’s doing press ups in the nude when the Rat Pack switch on the stadium lights and Trina starts a running commentary as he escapes into the night. I believe Kaufman knew full well that we’d get caught up in this stuff too, because he throws in reminders , such as Jackie going off to pee but coming back with a fake knife in her back, like she’s been stabbed by a backwoods maniac. It serves not just to



build the bond between these girls in our minds but to remind us that we're still watching a horror movie. Eventually, of course, we realise that someone else is watching them too.

For some reason, Ike and Addley, Mother's two boys, let the girls be that evening and the whole of the next day and I can't help but wonder if that was a connection to the title in the original draught of the script, even though nobody mentions it in the final movie. There's no obvious reason why these two homicidal nitwits should show such restraint, unless the girls arrive on a Friday evening and Ike and Addley need to kidnap them on Saturday night to deliver as a Mother's Day gift.

By the way, almost all countries celebrate Mother's Day on a Sunday, because the modern incarnation evolved out of Christian celebrations like Mothering Sunday, the fourth Sunday in Lent, though that's supposed to be a celebration of the Mother Church. Many countries celebrate Mother's Day as at least partly a religious celebration, often tied to the Virgin Mary, especially in Roman Catholic nations. Others lose the focus on childbirth, tying it instead to International Women's Day in early March. So maybe the last important hour of this really is set on Mother's Day.

Of course, nowadays, what most of us know as Mother's Day is a secular holiday, celebrated on the second Sunday of May in the United States, and that grew out of a memorial held in Grafton, West Virginia in 1908 for Ann Reeves Jarvis. She had been a nurse who helped soldiers on both sides of the American Civil War and, along with a fellow suffragette, Julia Ward Howe, had pushed for a Mother's Day dedicated to peace. In fact, in 1870, she issued a Mother's Day Proclamation, calling for mothers of all nations to collectively work to promote peace.

Needless to say, that never happened, of course, so, after her death in 1905, her daughter, Anna Jarvis, took up that flag and campaigned for a new Mother's Day, this time in her mother's honour. The 1908 memorial became the first such celebration and St. Andrew's Methodist Church, at which it took place, now houses the International Mother's Day Shrine. Anna's campaign was rejected by Congress in 1908, joking that it would lead to a Mother-in-Law's Day, but, by 1911, every U.S. state had adopted

the holiday, which led Woodrow Wilson to make it official in 1914. And yes, that makes it far more consistent than Presidents Day, wherever you place its apostrophe (or don't).

Ironically, it promptly turned into a holiday that Anna Jarvis hated, a philosophical clash that surrounds every commercial holiday today. She had meant for it to be about sentiment rather than profit, given that a mother is “the person who has done more for you than anyone else in the world,” but instead of writing heartfelt personal letters to their mums, people just bought cards from companies like Hallmark instead and Jarvis saw that commercialisation as exploitation.

She had actually trademarked Mother's Day, with that exact spelling because she intended for each person to recognise their own mother rather than every mother everywhere, and threatened a series of lawsuits against companies who abused her creation. She organised boycotts of her own day and protested at a meeting of American War Mothers, who were selling carnations, her own Mother's Day symbol, to raise funds. Jarvis would absolutely despise what Mother's Day has become and, while she'd certainly despise this movie too, I think she might just get some perverse pleasure out of it.

I wonder how much perverse pleasure some of these actors had making this movie, because quite a few of them did so under fake names. Ike and



Addley, for instance, who leap out of the darkness, tie the girls up in their own sleeping bags and drag them through the woods to mum, are played by Holden McGuire and Billy Ray McQuade. Those might seem like good ol' boy names and that's because they made them up.

The former is really Frederick Coffin, perhaps a more unlikely name but his real one nonetheless. He was already an experienced actor and is now even more so, with a hundred credits on mainstream films and TV shows like *Wayne's World* and *Dallas*. The latter is really Michael McCleery, who has less of a career than his screen brother but still a career, with roles in eleven features including *L.A. Confidential* and *Joy Ride*.

Perhaps most surprising to find here is Beatrice Pons, who took the name of Rose Ross to play Mother. She'd been retired for over a decade at this point and was best known for sitcoms, having played Joe E. Ross's wife on both *The Phil Silvers Show* in the fifties and *Car 54, Where are You?* in the sixties.

It's fair to say that none of them acted in anything like this again. Coffin and McCleery both play dumb as the boys. Ike has a set of scary false teeth and mumbles through them, like he's a retarded Lee Marvin. Addley is like a hyperactive hillbilly version of Bruce Springsteen. They rape Jackie first, but while her Rat Pack sisters experience the pain by proxy in another room, the act itself is bizarre. It's vicious, of course, but it's also staged, as



a sort of vaudeville skit for Mother. Addley puts on a French accent and a variety routine with an invisible dog. The boys actually break off the rape when Mother criticises their performance, switching over instead to “the Shirley Temple”. A rape scene should never feel comfortable, but this one feels disturbing in unusual ways and it’s here that we remember what Mother told the two hippies at the beginning: she keeps in touch with the world through TV. And as we kick off the next day, perhaps Mother’s Day, everything’s pop culture. Which side are you on? Punk or disco? And did you have a Fonz pinball table?

The boys are even woken up by a *Sesame Street* alarm clock, which isn’t just a reflection of their mental age but a striking reminder of how surreal their world is. “Come on now,” says Big Bird, “one foot out of bed, now the other.” We can’t miss that when this icon of American childhood wants them to “have a nice day”, given that this particular nice day will be taken up by them raping two women that they abducted from a campsite.

That’s not immediately on their mind, either. First, it’s breakfast time and a wide array of brand names that we know Mother must have bought because she saw their ads on TV. Every time we see the television, there’s an advert playing. Now this film was made on a skimpy \$115,000 budget, so I’m not buying into Troma paying any of the companies whose brands appear here for their inclusion. I doubt any of them would have approved



that anyway, even if they'd been approached. Then it's exercise time and nap time and horsing around time, all with Mother looking proudly on and smiling at how well her boys have turned out.

Of course, rape-revenge movies inherently unfold in two sections and the second is surprisingly tense. The girls get loose, find Jackie and aim at escape. There's a scene where Abbey lowers Trina out of the window, just as she did for a date in college, but it tears her hands up; she keeps quiet and internalises the pain because Addley is right below them. It's powerful stuff, especially for Nancy Hendrickson, who gets quite the character arc as Abbey. I've lost track of how many films I've seen with women being pursued in the woods but there's real tension in this one because Kaufman just keeps on setting us up for one thing and then showing us something else entirely. Nothing here goes as we expect and, quite frankly, we expect films like this to go exactly how we expect. Kaufman even flips Mother's happy, albeit batshit crazy, family on its head, throwing in back story and injecting sympathy where most filmmakers would avoid it, right up to the final death scene, which is an honest Mother's Day gift.

Don't get me wrong, this is what it is and it's not high art. However, it seems almost revolutionary today if we compare it to pretty much any other eighties slasher movie, a genre well known for its transparent plots, non-entity characters and acute lack of surprises.

Rape-revenge movies are inherently empowering to women, because they introduce them as literal sex objects and then transform them into powerful agents of karma, but it's not difficult to argue that every single strong character in this picture is female and all the male characters, not that there are many of them, are dominated by women. It's telling that our three female campers have believable, capably drawn back stories but the two men who kidnap, rape and torment them are absolutely nothing but the sons of their mother.

This could well be the definition of a movie that's ripe for reevaluation, because everyone and their dog, from Roger Ebert on down, hated this film with a passion in 1980 but, forty years on, we surely can't fail to see more than they did. And hey, happy Mother's Day!



After all she's done for you,  
what do you get her on....

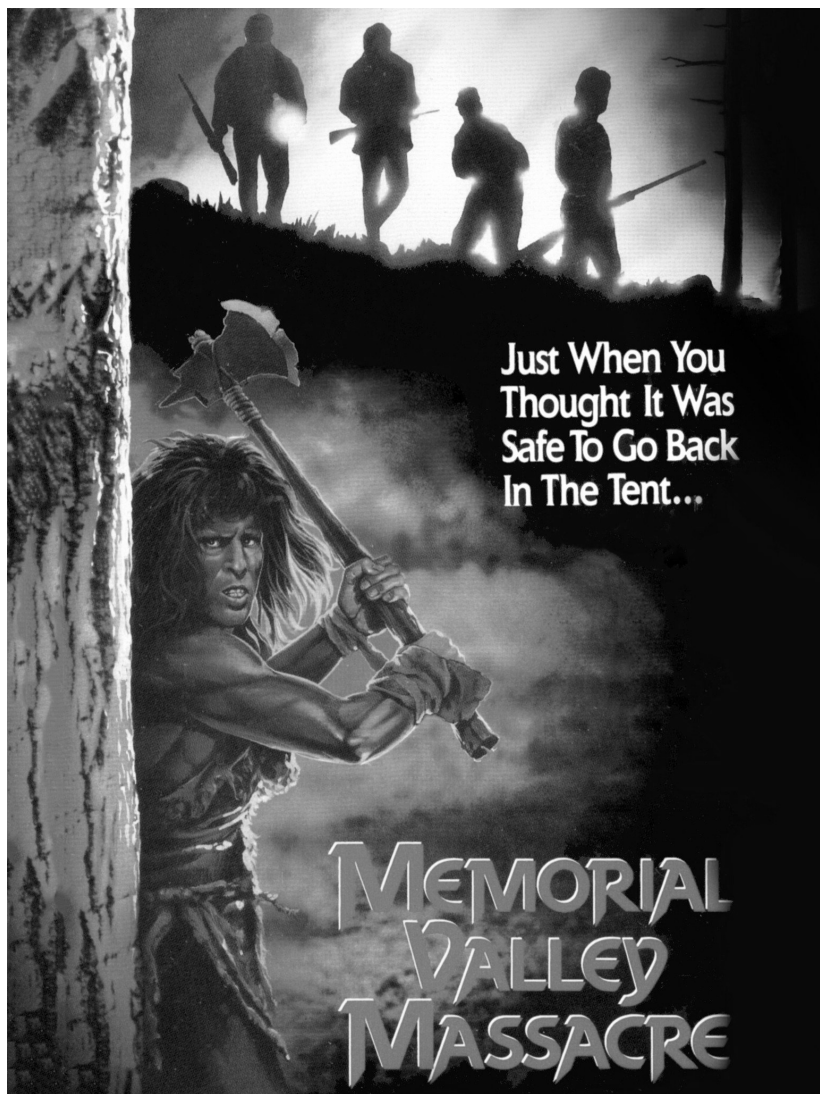
# Mother's Day



A terror, suspense film

SAGA Film Presents "Mother's Day" Starring Nancy Hendrickson, Deborah Lube, Tiana Pierce, Rose Ross, Holden McGuire, Billy Ray McCaule. Produced by Michael Kravitz and Charles Kaufman. Associate Producers Lloyd Kaufman and Michael Herz. Executive Producer Alexander Beck. Production Executive Ray Sundin. Directed by Charles Kaufman.

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## MEMORIAL VALLEY MASSACRE (1989)

*Memorial Day*

Director: Robert C. Hughes

Writers: Robert C. Hughes and George Frances Skrow

Stars: John Kerry, Mark Mears, Lesa Lee, John Caso, William Smith and Cameron Mitchell

Given that you're reading about *Memorial Valley Massacre* in a book about horror movies set on holidays, you might wonder why it isn't called *Memorial Day Massacre* and I have exactly the same question. It's absolutely set on Memorial Day, but also in Memorial Valley, because the Memorial Day weekend is when the Memorial Valley Campground opens for the summer and it isn't ready this year, for reasons that have nothing to do with COVID-19.

We have no idea why Memorial Valley is called Memorial Valley but we do know that the movie was originally called *Memorial Day* because it still is in the end credits. There's a poster online that still has that title too and the artwork on it is much better than for the film's reissue titles like *Valley of Death* or *Son of Sleepaway Camp*. No, it has absolutely nothing to do with the *Sleepaway Camp* films, but little details like that aren't going to stop the unscrupulous. I'm more surprised, given the art on the poster, that not one company has yet marketed it as *Son of the Ultimate Warrior*. While there are many other films called *Memorial Day*, none seem to be close enough to this one, in either subject or release date, to warrant a title change.

My guess is that it changed when the filmmakers noticed that there was an actual Memorial Day Massacre and wanted to distance themselves from it. Reading up on it feels eerily like a contemporary news report but it actually happened in Chicago in 1937, when striking steel workers set off on a march to the Republic Steel Mill, only to be blocked by the Chicago police department. While the strikers were unarmed men and women, the police, "feeling threatened", promptly opened fire, leaving ten dead. Forty

others had bullet wounds and a further hundred were beaten with clubs. Nine were permanently disabled and many had serious head injuries. No cop was ever prosecuted, of course, and the coroner's jury called a verdict of "justifiable homicide". News footage was suppressed. And, while I fully expect to see a rash of horror movies soon that are deliberately set during peaceful protests, that's not what this is. This is clearly an eighties slasher movie as it follows many of the standard conventions, but it also sports an unusual killer and an even more unusual ending.

The beginning isn't unusual but I like it anyway. We're treated to a set of pastoral scenes of the American countryside, packed with stock footage of the friendly little critters that populate it, to the accompaniment of a perky score. It feels just like we're going into a *Grizzly Adams* movie on Lifetime. There's one ominous note as the title slides onto the screen, as it reminds us that there's going to be a massacre in Memorial Valley at some point but, even then, it's shown in a traditional western movie font so we immediately think of an attack by Native Americans on settlers invading their land. Only the convoy of RVs driving slowly through the puddles on unpaved country roads tells us that we're in the present day. Well, that, and the big businessman in a blue suit and a red tie who has huge plans for Memorial Valley—ski resorts, condominiums, the works—and isn't happy that his campground isn't ready for its grand opening. So what if a man died in a construction accident and there's a dead dog tainting the water. No excuses, he says!

He's Cameron Mitchell, the first big name in the cast, but he promptly drives out of the movie after one scene, because I'm sure the production couldn't afford him for more than a single day. Maybe he owed someone a favour and did it for free. Instead, we're introduced to his son, David, a pleasant young man who deliberately chose to show up to work at the campground without his dad knowing anything about it, and his new boss in Memorial Valley, George Webster, who's a capable fellow who's starting to go grey, possibly because the actor's name is John Kerry and he knows that every critic is going to crack a joke about that in their review. This John Kerry is an experienced actor still working today and he was already

an experienced actor in 1989, with a string of roles as cops and security guards behind him, but what can he do? Mark Mears, on the other hand, who plays David Sangster, never earned another credit. David and George do bristle each other a little, but we know already that they're going to get along and collectively face whatever's coming.

And what's coming is just around the corner because the script springs it on us early. It's a caveman. Now, he isn't a prehistoric 7' 2" caveman like Eegah. He's just a regular size caveman who keeps himself to himself when not raiding the campground's stores and appears to hate loud noises. He wears an outfit made of sewn-together animal hides, a bad rock star wig and a set of gnarly false teeth, but he's a fair enough caveman, able to face his fear and knock out a visiting Doberman who sniffs him out in his hiding place. It does seem a little early to spring the "monster" of the piece on us but we still have no idea who he is, where he's from or why he's in Memorial Valley and therein lies the story part of this movie. We don't know this bit yet, but he's not even credited as a caveman; if we read IMDb before watching, we'll see that he's credited as a "hermit". Given



that he grunts rather than speaks, he does seem to be a very caveman sort of hermit, especially as he does, in fact, live in a bona fide cave. Let's face it, folks, he's a caveman!

Before we get to the slasher movie aspects of this slasher movie, we're introduced to a whole slew of characters. Only one seems to be working the campground with George and David; that's Deke, a capable handyman who's black without anyone commenting on it, which is refreshing for an eighties horror movie. Amazingly, he doesn't even die first! The others are all campers, most of whom misbehave in the ways you'd expect, both with each other and with regards to the sanctity of nature. They chop down trees and carve initials into them, throw litter everywhere and disobey every rule they can find, especially the ones about noise. There's a cute young lady named Cheryl, who wants to be alone, so we know she'll end up with David. There's Eddie, a biker as stereotypical as his colleagues aren't: one is an obviously gay black dude with a plump girlfriend. There's a trio of youths most interested in which one Wendy's going to sleep with. There's an obnoxiously normal couple with a spoiled brat of a son. And



there's Gen. John Mintz and his pet blonde, Pepper.

It's worth mentioning too that, while not one of these characters is stunningly well written or stunningly well portrayed by the local actors the production presumably drummed up, they do serve as a pretty decent backdrop for this picture and pretty decent fodder for our killer caveman. They're all drawn just well enough for us to have some sort of connection to them, whether a positive or negative one, but never enough to make us care when they inevitably become victims. They liven up the campground a little while we wonder about the caveman's back story and gradually get filled in.

You see, as much as he's obviously a caveman, he's just as obviously not your thawed out of the ice after a million years sort of caveman. He has traps, but he lets rabbits out of them. He shares his food with a mouse that happens to wander into his cave. And, given what we know about the paleo diet, how the heck does Memorial Valley end up with a vegetarian caveman? Especially one that beats up ATVs for making noise rather than the entitled idiots riding them.

Surprisingly, given this intriguing setup, the script lets us in on his secret far too early, so early in fact that he's only killed a single camper at that point, thus prompting us to shift from trying to figure out the story mode to sitting back to enjoy the deaths mode. Not only have we only had one thus far, but nobody but us knows about it yet because it was way out in the woods and the other campers are too busy partying and trying to get out of the sudden rain to notice that the chubby entitled thief of a kid called Walter, isn't with them any more. It's only when a bear noses its way into a tent and the three kids look out to see Walter's corpse amongst their scattered food that the screams begin and the stage really gets set.

Of course, we know that there's no real contest between caveman and campers, as only George and Deke among them have any experience at all with woodsmanship. They were special forces buddies in Vietnam, with the former apparently a very capable tracker. Everyone else is just a death scene waiting to happen.

What ought to seem odd is that, given that we spend the Memorial Day

weekend in Memorial Valley, with at least three characters being former members of the U.S. military, nobody ever focuses on the actual meaning of the holiday.

It's not just because the other big name in the film, William Smith, last seen on St. Patrick's Day in *Maniac Cop*, isn't actually in it for much longer than Cameron Mitchell. He gets a few scenes here and there as Gen. Mintz, but mostly in isolation and it's easy to see how they could have been shot together pretty quickly. It's testament to his charisma that he stamps his presence on this movie even though he hardly interacts with anyone else in it, but not one of his scenes has anything at all to do with Memorial Day. Even though he overtly plays a military man here, so much so that it's odd when George calls him John instead of General, he's never an obvious tie to the holiday. Maybe we're supposed to simply see him as a proxy for all the other members of the military who gave their lives for a better cause than not helping out fellow campers.

After all, unlike the rest of the world, where Armistice Day and its two minute silence at the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month morphed into some form of Remembrance Day in November, the U.S. expanded that into a whole network of days. Maybe Gen. Mintz got confused as to which one the movie was about, especially with that date taken off the title.

Initially, the U.S. had an Armistice Day on 11th November, just like the other members of the Allied Powers in World War I. However, while most of the rest evolved that into a Remembrance Day to remember those who gave their lives in the line of duty, the States went with Veteran's Day so as to be able to remember all those who served, whether they died or not.

Perhaps that was because they already had a day to remember those who died on duty, Decoration Day, which dated back to the years after the American Civil War. It started turning into Memorial Day in 1882 and was officially completed by law in 1967. It's traditionally but unofficially seen as the beginning of summer, though, unlike its pagan equivalents, its date was moved by the Uniform Monday Holiday Act of 1968, from a traditional 30th May to the last Monday in May.



The U.S. also celebrates Armed Services Day on the third Saturday in May, which honours those who are currently in service. Add to that five individual days to celebrate the five individual branches of the military, which were originally intended to be consolidated into Armed Services Day but never were, plus another for the National Guard and at least one more specialised one for Vietnam veterans, and the military get quite a chunk of the calendar. Women Veterans Day is gradually being recognised by more states too, though of course Memorial Day and Veterans Day are the most prominent, not least because most people get those days off from work as national holidays.

And maybe this is another reason why the film was renamed. Why call a movie *Memorial Day* if it has nothing to do with the actual holiday? Sure, the events here happen over the Memorial Day weekend, as the summer season begins, and, spoiler alert, I believe all three military men die on the the day itself, but nobody's actually celebrating Memorial Day, even those aforementioned military men. Not a single person steps up to thank them for their service, though these campers are hardly the most upstanding



members of the community: they're the entitled and the obnoxious, those who opted out of society and those too focused on one thing to notice it.

Really, *Memorial Day* wouldn't have been a useful title and just adding the logical *Massacre* brings us into conflict with the existing Memorial Day Massacre and so hey, why not go with something else. I'd dearly love to know why Memorial Valley is called Memorial Valley, given that nothing has ever been built there until this campground, but maybe it was named by a psychic. After all, it's certainly a memorial now.

I rather like this movie and without the guilt that often comes with liking crappy eighties slasher movies. It's not a good film by any stretch of the imagination but it's not really a bad one either; it gets on with its job quickly and capably enough that it's hard not to enjoy it. The cast and crew are capable without ever stunning us with their talent. Robert C. Hughes, the writer and director, was a director of television with a couple of cheap features behind him (*Zadar! Cow from Hell* anyone? Spoiler: it's not a horror movie, just a comedy about making a horror movie), but he does a smooth enough job here to make me surprised that he only made one



more feature before going back to TV and shows like *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers*. Maybe he was just too late to capitalise on the straight to video market that he would seem to have been more than qualified for. His co-writer, George Frances Skrow, only has one other credit, from the same year, and that isn't uncommon for the people who worked on this picture. Star Mark Mears didn't find a steady if undistinguished career in B movies and neither did Lesa Lee, who plays Cheryl. Both should have done more.

The most interesting actor in the picture never acted again either and that's John Caso, who has quite a hefty presence as the "hermit" caveman, even without the benefit of a single line of dialogue, though part of that is surely due to the fact that he's the uniqueness here. Without him, IMDb's description of "Campers on a holiday are terrorized by an axe-wielding maniac" would be accurate and just as routine as that sounds. He's clearly in great shape, without being a muscleman, and we watch him flip off tree branches or through windows as if he was a natural parkour athlete. He feels like he belongs out there in the woods and I can't say that I have any issues with the way the script treats him, as unusual as that ends up being.

The only problem with his performance is one that we simply can't blame him for, which is that the way that his puzzled looks at the people entering his domain are reminiscent of a constipated Ben Stiller, who was only about as big a star as John Caso at the time. I wonder what cinema would be like today had Caso have had Stiller's career.

**LOCK UP YOUR FATHERS**

**FATHER'S DAY**

*The Dupe Designs*

LLOYD KAUFMAN AND MICHAEL HERZ PRESENT TROMA TEAM PRODUCTION AN ASTRON-6 FILM  
"FATHER'S DAY" STARRING ADAM BROOKS MATT KENNEDY CONOR SWEENEY AMY GROENING BRENT NEALE GARRETT HNATIUK  
MEREDITH SWEENEY AND MACKENZIE MURDOCK SPECIAL EFFECTS BY STEVEN KOSTANSKI ADAM BROOKS JEREMY GILLESPIE  
MUSIC AND COSTUME DESIGNER BY ADAM BROOKS PRODUCTION DESIGNER MATT MANJOURIDES AND ADAM BROOKS  
WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY LLOYD KAUFMAN AND MICHAEL HERZ

## FATHER'S DAY (2011)

*Father's Day*

Directors: Astron-6

Writers: Astron-6

Stars: Adam Brooks, Matt Kennedy, Conor Sweeney, Amy Groening, Mackenzie Murdock, Meredith Sweeney. Brent Neale. Garrett Hnatiuk, Kevin Anderson, Billy Sadoo, Alcon van der Baek and Zsuzsi

If *Mother's Day*, the 1980 Troma movie, may not have actually been set on Mother's Day, at least we're in no doubt that *Father's Day*, the unrelated 2011 Troma movie, is indeed tied to Father's Day. In fact, it makes the point so crystal clear in the opening scene that we could be forgiven for assuming it was deliberately trying to make up for that odd omission over thirty years earlier.

It's an icky start. The bed is bouncing, but not for the reasons you think. Someone's carving someone else into little pieces. Oh, and having sex with his bloody skull, so, then again, maybe it is what you think. This is a Troma movie, after all, even if it was made by the Canadian filmmaking collective known as Astron-6, and it's more outrageous than *Mother's Day* in almost every regard.

Our gay necrophile doesn't have long, as someone struts his way down the corridor with gun drawn. The pervert killer does manage to escape out of the window but he's promptly shot, run over and shot again just to be sure. "Happy Father's Day," our new killer tells the old one, looking down from a rakish angle with his one good eye.

This is Ahab and he's our lead, even if he doesn't show back up again for a while. I should clarify that it's really only fifteen minutes but it feels like a lot longer because the script doesn't seem to know what it wants to tell us and it throws absolutely everything but the kitchen sink into these opening scenes.

It's also very gay and I do mean that literally, rather than as some inane

politically incorrect insult. Within the first ten minutes, we've witnessed a cannibalistic gay necrophile indulging his vices; we've been introduced to a young gay man named Twink, who doesn't really work at a pizza joint, as he tells the cops, but robs men he's sucking off in the street for his pimp, Walnut; and we've watched Twink's tormented and possibly homophobic father raped and set on fire by a fat man. That's pretty gay stuff. Even the cop who wonders about Twink, because the last time he saw his dad was when he picked him up from the police station one day earlier after being questioned about being found in a room with a buggered dead man, slaps him on the tush and tells him that he's watching his ass.

Beyond this obvious attempt to subvert the slasher genre from its usual obsession with female sexuality and cheap T&A, this movie has little idea what it wants to be. Much of it is a clear throwback to the grainy extreme content of the seventies, with the music to match, but the title credits are Tarantino-esque throwback exploitation and the rest of it is dark slapstick comedy, as if this isn't Tarantino re-exploring the seventies but an episode of *The Benny Hill Show* going gay hardcore.

For instance, Father O'Flynn, a blind Irish priest on life support, tasks Father John Sullivan with tracking down Ahab, to finish what he started so long ago, but Sullivan's montage search through every biome the Earth has to offer is quintessential *Benny Hill*, merely shown at normal speed and



without a laugh track. This is all overplayed straight too, as if Astron-6 are wanting to give new life to clichés by making them more stupid, which is a rather odd approach, especially in the unlikely genre of gay rape-revenge movie. But then again, why not? Troma have always been deliberately equal opportunists when it comes to being offensive.

Like *Mother's Day*, this isn't rape-revenge but rape-revenge delivered by proxy and we gradually learn the story. A serial rapist and murderer, Chris Fuchman, pronounced exactly how you think, especially in O'Flynn's Irish accent, has racked up ten victims by the time he's caught, every one of them a father, leading to the inevitable moniker of the Father's Day Killer. However, he's released on a technicality so, unsurprisingly, the rapes and murders continue. As one of the new victims is Ahab's father, he dedicates himself to vengeance, succeeds in tracking him down at his latest crime scene, and receives a ten year sentence for a vigilante killing of the wrong man. Now, that's a special category of dark irony and I found it hard to reconcile twisted moments like this one with ridiculous scenes like Twink and Ahab escaping from the latter's sister's place under the eyes of the cops by throwing on red dresses and blonde wigs. Did I mention that Ahab has both a beard and an eyepatch? How dumb is Det. Stiger, who still believes that Ahab is the Father's Day Killer?

I don't think I've even mentioned that Ahab had a sister, but then



Chelsea never told her stripper colleagues that she had a brother. Frankly, given that we don't even see a member of the fairer sex until the twenty minute mark when Ahab shows up at the Low Life strip club, it's perhaps understandable that we've forgotten that they even exist.

Frankly, even perky boobs in oversaturated colour don't do their usual job when every other scene contains something that will make all men in the audience cringe. Twink and Ahab may escape from Chelsea's place, but they leave Walnut behind. In quick succession, Chelsea stands on his balls to make a point and Fuchman pulls out his wedding package and bites it in half like a spring roll, dribbled gobbets of grue dangling like bean sprouts. I'd suggest that even the most highly sexed straight man isn't going to be thinking about Chelsea's poledancing after that. Instead he's going to focus on her research into Fuchman and her ballsy insistence to Ahab: "Don't make this some bullshit boy's club."

This is perhaps the defining example of the polarising film, unless you throw out something as arthouse extreme as *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom*. The people who are going to hate this are going to unequivocally despise it, with vein pulsating passion, and they're probably not going to get past the first scene. Any that do will probably be so literally shocked by this content that their fingers will refuse to obey their brains by pressing stop on their remotes and they'll be Tromatised for life. However, the rest of the audience are going to adore this film, because it visits a whole atlas of subversive places that they may never have seen in any movie before and it pays for the house specials too. Of course, most of these places are so painful they're cringeworthy, including a whole variety of acts that should never be done to the human penis, on or off screen. Many of them are soaked in gore, like when Fuchman massacres his way through the entire Low Life strip club, including Sleazy Mary, Ahab's ex, who conveniently runs the place. Some of them are even hallucinogenic, thanks to Ahab's toxic berries.

Oddly, given how outrageous and exploitative this picture is, not to mention how often it looks deliberately cheap, there are some real shots of beauty that stand out even against their context. For instance, Ahab



standing in front of the cross over his dad's grave is an archetypal western shot and it's perfectly framed. Sure, we promptly discover that the grave really contains guns rather than dad, but still. There's a distance shot of the three leads on a viaduct that's neatly done too. Sure, it's right after Ahab throws Fuchman off it, but still. The last shot of Sleazy Mary is one of my favourites, as her hand slowly morphs in death into one final middle finger to Ahab. Surely rigor mortis doesn't kick in that quickly, but still. These moments of beauty all stand up in stark contrast to scenes of an obese gay rapist getting his jollies in front of an array of hooded cultists or oversaturated scenes of the aftermath of a strip club massacre, let alone awful rear projection shots and a hilariously inept trailer for *Star Raiders*, playing on Astron-6 at 3.00 am, after *Father's Day*. I don't want to watch it, but I'd tune in before I'd watch *Dance Til You Die* after *Cinco de Mayo*.

In other words, it's a really ugly movie that knows how to be beautiful when it wants to be. The same goes for the music, which has moments of ugliness in its jarring synths but moments of beauty in snippets of *Adagio for Strings* or songs like Vickie O's *Blue Angel*. It can walk both these sides because, for a full hour, this is outrageous grindhouse cinema, gleefully ignoring all the rules that it's supposed to embrace and embracing all the taboos it's supposed to ignore.

Then, for my money, it gets interesting. Fuchman, the clear villain of



the piece, is dead and at Ahab's doing, providing him with the sweet sweet vengeance he sought. However, Chelsea is still in his hands, in Hell, so our trio of leads decide that they have to follow him there in order to rescue her, and this gets really weird. Never mind the film's depiction of Heaven, with Troma head honcho Lloyd Kaufman as God and all the dead strippers from the *Low Life* as a topless string of angels willing to do whatever Fr. Sullivan wants, Hell is a truly trippy place, right down to the stop motion animation.

Roger Ebert famously hated *Mother's Day*. He gave it a zero star review, explaining that he would have walked out after the first five minutes if he didn't have such dedication to see how the rest of the Saturday afternoon audience responded to it. He called it a geek film, presumably referring to the carnival meaning, in which a geek is a freakshow performer who bites the heads of chickens, then ended his review with the timeless question of "why anybody of any age would possibly want to see this film". Ebert died in 2013, so there is a slim possibility that he saw *Father's Day* and I'd dearly love to know what he thought of it. The closest I've found is this: "*Father's Day* is a brainless feature-length sitcom with too much sit and no com," but that's the 1997 movie starring Robin Williams and Billy Crystal. Ebert didn't hate every Troma movie he saw and the company offered up tribute to him at Cannes in 2013, Kaufman pointing a glance up at the heavens



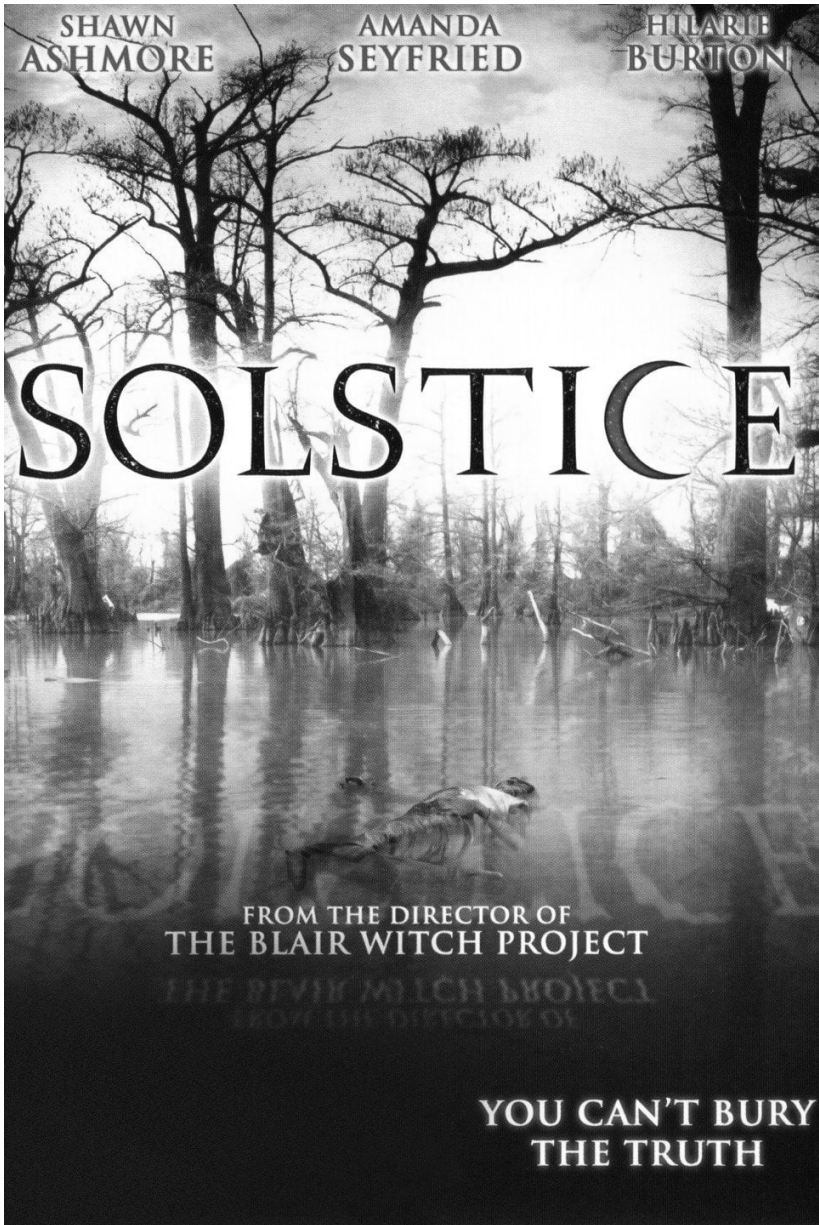
and shouting, “Roger, even if you did hate *Mother’s Day* and you liked *Home Alone 3*, we still love you.”

I just think that a movie should have something more to offer up in its own merits than setting itself up to be hated by Roger Ebert. I’d have liked this a lot more if it had ditched the sophomoric humour and concentrated on the gruesome grindhouse trip beyond what even the most outrageous grindhouse directors could have conjured up in the seventies. I didn’t find it funny, but I did dig a lot of where it went, from gruesome baby demon stomping to the awkwardly telling scene with the devil that follows it. I thought that, from a filmmaking standpoint, it showed a lot of promise, and indeed I enjoyed Astron-6’s next feature, *The Editor*, an atmospheric homage to giallo cinema, far more.

But, if I’m brutally honest, my chief pleasure here was watching Troma annihilate yet another mainstream consumerist holiday. Hilariously, the holiday that is Father’s Day is actually older than the equivalent Mother’s Day, because, of course it is in an abiding patriarchy, but it was founded by a woman, Sonora Smart Dodd, in 1910.

Most countries celebrate it on the third Sunday in June and I’m a little bit happy to see that nobody does anything of longstanding tradition. It’s just a day to buy greeting cards and try to pretend that you like your dad. Sure, some Roman Catholic countries tie it to the the Feast of St. Joseph, the “legal father” of Jesus, given that his wife got knocked up through divine intervention, but, ironically, it’s also often a day for abstinence when families avoid meat. The Russians tie it instead to Defender of the Fatherland Day in February, calling it Man’s Day, because it presumably sounds tougher and probably does all the more in Russian. However, the Wikipedia section on Father’s Day in the U.S., where it was inevitably founded, struggles to say anything at all of interest, eventually stooping to the level of commercial retailers adapting to the holiday by promoting gifts of electronics and tools. It might as well have plumped for “propane and propane accessories”.

Please, Troma, keep skewering these pointless holidays with overkill.



## SOLSTICE (2008)

*Summer Solstice*

Director: Daniel Myrick

Writers: Daniel Myrick, Martin Musatov and Ethan Erwin, based on the 2003 film *Midsommer*, by Carsten Myllerup and Rasmus Heisterberg

Stars: Elisabeth Harnois, Shawn Ashmore, Hilarie Burton, Amanda Seyfreid, Tyler Hoechlin, Matt O'Leary and R. Lee Ermey

I tend to avoid the inevitable American remakes of foreign horror films that succeed enough to be noticed by the mainstream, but I saw *Solstice* before I realised that it was based on a Danish film called *Midsommer*, and enjoyed its translation to the Louisiana bayou enough that I'm tentative about seeking out the original in case it spoils this one. In other major instances, such as *The Vanishing* or *Let the Right One In*, I saw the original first and so don't have that problem. And, of course, I expect *Midsommer* to be better. I'll get to it eventually.

Another reason why I'm not the logical audience for *Solstice* is that it's a Daniel Myrick film, he who started out so successfully with *The Blair Witch Project*, surely the most popular horror movie I've never seen, on account of my having serious problems with shakycam. He hasn't had the most prolific career, with few credits in between that debut in 1999 and a burst of activity around 2007 and 2008, but this should have brought him some opportunity, as it's a capable psychological drama that's wildly different from what he was known for. Then again, maybe that was the problem.

The majority of the psychological weight here stems from the inherent connection between twins, one of a pair of which we meet immediately. She's Megan Thomas and we meet her at the grave of her sister Sophie, who died in 2005 at the age of only eighteen. We know that we're in New Orleans because the graves are all above ground vaults, on account of the water table being so high that burying them the traditional six feet under would just result in floating coffins. How horror movie is that?

Anyway, Sophie died on Christmas Eve and we join Megan the following June as she prepares to head out with friends to her family's plantation house at Nowell Lake to both help get her mind off things and allow her the opportunity to pack up Sophie's belongings. As you might imagine, doing these things simultaneously will be quite an accomplishment, as everything sparks memories. And that's even before she decides to hook up with Christian, who used to be Sophie's boyfriend. Sure, they'd split up before her suicide but how awkward can you get?

I don't know how deliberately the Danish original dabbled in horror tropes, but Myrick, who also adapted its script with Martin Musatov and Ethan Erwin, certainly likes them. Megan and her friends stop at the only store in the vicinity of the house to pick up supplies and some higher force wants her to read the latest copy of the *Fortean Times*, especially an article on the Summer Solstice called "The Dead Speak". They almost drive into R. Lee Ermey, which is probably not a good idea. It's great to see him in a part other than Drill Sergeant or Sheriff, though; it's not the biggest role he's ever had but it has a haunting presence that's entirely appropriate for where we end up. And no, he's not a ghost, like he was in *The Frighteners*. Best of all, the car stalls just before a little bridge, right after the driver jokes that this is the point in a movie where they'd run out of gas and the guys would get raped by the inbred locals. He isn't out of gas and the car just had a service, so that's freaky. Fortunately, there are no inbred locals and they drive on.

Thus far, this clearly isn't your usual cabin in the woods story. Sure, the



girls are all hot and bothered over the new guy at the store but this is far from the usual sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll party trip. Sure, Mark, Alicia's boyfriend, and Christian can be jackasses but they're mostly considerate, polite and well-behaved. If this is what they get up to on a trip away with the girls, then they're the sort of young gentlemen you'd have no trouble taking home to meet your parents. Alicia's decent too and, after Megan spends a night with Christian, Zoe talks to him about her best friend being really vulnerable right now. They're all good kids and Sophie may have been a good kid too, though she clearly had problems because we learn about some of those in flashback. Elisabeth Harnois plays both Megan and Sophie and does an excellent job of it, ensuring that they're different in mannerisms as much as hair colour, though clever work with lighting and make up helps delineate them too.

The tone is also a lot more unsettling than it is scary and part of that comes from how straight it's all played, even with inevitable jump scares that are, quite frankly, responsible for all the worst parts of the movie and should have been seriously minimised. Instead of a score, we often hear the bayou—wind, insects and birds—which is neatly effective. The script plays up the awkwardness of the situation; when Mark accidentally spills wine on Alicia's shirt, it's a bigger deal because it's one that Sophie gave her and she doesn't want to stain the memory.

Some of it seems supernatural though. Sophie's teddybear keyfob keeps showing up in surprising places, even though Megan packed it into a box and taped it shut. When she goes for a run and sticks a foot into some



quicksand, she ends up with a cut on her hand exactly as she imagined the previous night. It's probably fair to say that these are clichéd scares, but they work in this context simply because they're unsettling, especially while Megan is suffering from survivor guilt. Especially given her sudden visions, why didn't she see it coming? Maybe this is all in her head.

There are still mysteries to point a way forward. At the Christmas Eve party, Sophie went upstairs and compulsively washed her hands. Why did she commit suicide anyway? Her circle seems far too well adjusted for it. And why does Megan recognise a hat in Ermev's truck when she passes it after her run? He's Leonard, he lives over the lake and he isn't as creepy as everyone tries to make out but we do have questions, especially with everything else going on.

So, where do we find answers? Well, that *Fortean Times* article suggests that the dead are closest to the living during the Summer Solstice, which is tomorrow at this point in the movie. We learn during another trip to the store that the hot clerk there, Nick, is from voodoo stock. His grandma could talk to the dead, especially around the solstice and so, when Megan invites him to their big dinner that night, we start to learn about what he can do from Cajun folklore to help her out. I'd have preferred a lot more of this to flavour this cinematic gumbo, but what we get is handled decently enough and it very much leads us forward.

This is definitely a slowburner of a movie, something that naysaying critics have focused on, but I didn't have a problem with that. It never drags, it builds slowly and surely as a psychological trip and the story is





carefully constructed and well interpreted by the actors, especially by Harnois and Ermev, who epitomise the tone their characters represent. I realise that Harnois's name isn't on the DVD cover image that introduces this piece and that's highly unfair, because she's the lead and undoubtedly the best thing about the movie.

Watching a second time, I find that I appreciated the slow burn even more. We get all the foreshadowing we need to understand the real story we're being told, even though it isn't the one we think it is for the longest time. We're also led down a different path that's entirely appropriate and emotionally valid, one that deepens some of the characters and adds some weight to what's to come. There are points where this feels like an Edgar Allan Poe tale of psychological guilt, both from characters who damn well ought to feel guilty and characters who do so only because of who they are and who they've lost. I know what it's like to lose a loved one, but I can't imagine what it would be like for that loved one to be my twin.

And, while the holiday that keeps getting mentioned is St. John's Eve, everything comes to a head on the Summer Solstice. There's actually quite a lot going on at this time of the year, between the solstice and the quarter day. The Summer Solstice is the longest day of the year, the day when the appropriate pole for the hemisphere reaches its maximum tilt towards the sun. That's 21st June. St. John's Eve happens two days later on the 23rd, a traditional night for bonfires and the night on which Mussorgsky's famous *Night on Bald Mountain* was set. In Denmark, which produced the original version of this film, it's celebrated rather like Walpurgisnacht in other



countries; it's when the Danes believe that witches gather on the Brocken. The actual feast day of St. John, as in John the Baptist, who's a key figure in Christianity, Islam and other religions, is held on the 24th, which is also Midsummer Day, traditionally the middle of summer. What all that means is that this relatively brief period of a mere five days becomes massively important to a wide variety of religions, cultures and traditions.

Sadly, while the Summer Solstice is crucial to this story, it doesn't get explained or explored as much as I'd have liked. We never find out why Megan's family has a traditional St. John's Eve trip to the bayou, beyond learning that her mother is a cultural anthropologist and thus celebrates pretty much every holiday in the book, maybe even this book. Our guide to the rituals and traditions we experience is Nick, but we're not given much background into why he knows any of it, beyond his claim that his grandma has voodoo powers. In particular, he brings up one Cajun belief about twins, which sees them as two halves of the same soul, but his explanation is over almost as soon as it's begun and, if we blink, we'll miss it. He leads a ritual in the water, which is supposedly the best conductor between our world and the next, with everyone holding hands and Nick pouring some wine inside the circle, but, if the details were explained, I blinked and missed them too. At least I'll be able to look up the tradition of disposing of objects cursed with voodoo by wrapping them in white cloth and burying them.

And, as you might have guessed, the biggest problems this movie has don't stem from anything it does but from what it doesn't do. Most of what it does is effective, except for the jump scares which are cheap and ignorable early and annoying late. One in particular spoils the best shot of the entire movie, in which Megan is walking towards a barn; she stops but her shadow carries on. That's neatly freaky but then a pointless jump scare steals the moment away.

It's mostly what it doesn't do that would have made the movie better: some more exploration and explanation of the rituals and the date; some more background and depth for Megan's friends, who start to appear as much decoration as emotional support; and some more for R. Lee Ermey

to do, given that we never buy into the creepy angle we find ourselves fed early. He's obviously important to the story and the reasons for that could have been raised earlier without being any sort of problem for the grand direction of the picture. Emotionally, it would have been worth it.

And so, having enjoyed this more than once but being fully aware of its flaws, I wonder if I should get round to biting the bullet and watching the original film. *Midsommer* (a different film to Ari Aster's *Midsommar*, which wasn't out when I wrote this chapter) was well received in Denmark and praised on many fronts; it was successful soon enough for the American remake rights to be snapped up only six months later. I wonder how much I would gain from watching a feature like this with a cast that I don't recognise in the slightest. Here, I knew Harnois from the original *C.S.I.* and Ermey from a slew of places, while all of Megan's photogenic friends have gone on to be recognisable by many, if not particularly by me: Shawn Ashmore from the *X-Men* series, Amanda Seyfried from *Les Misérables*, Hilarie Burton from *One Tree Hill*, Matt O'Leary from the *Spy Kids* films and Tyler Hoechlin from the Arrowverse, where he plays both Clark Kent and Superman. Sorry, was that a spoiler?

Mostly, though, there are so many ways in which Europeans celebrate Midsummer that I'd struggle to believe that there isn't a lot more cultural grounding in the original film and I'd really like to see that.

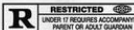


JULY 4TH  
WILL NEVER  
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**UNCLESAM**

GABLE PRODUCTION INC. PRESENTS A GEORGE G. BRAUNSTEIN PRODUCTION OF A WILLIAM LUSTIG PICTURE **UNCLE SAM**  
STARRING BO HOPKINS - TIMOTHY BOTTOMS - ROBERT FORSTER - P.J. SOLES - WILLIAM SMITH  
DAVID FRALICK - ISAAC HAYES PRODUCTION DESIGNER CHARLOTTE MALMLOF DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY JAMES LEBOVITZ  
EDITED BY BOB MURAWSKI MUSIC BY MARC GOVERNOR WRITTEN BY LARRY COHEN PRODUCED BY GEORGE G. BRAUNSTEIN  
DIRECTED BY WILLIAM LUSTIG



## UNCLE SAM (1981)

*Independence Day*

Director: William Lustig

Writer: Larry Cohen

Stars: William Smith, David Shark Fralick, Leslie Neale, Matthew Flint, Anne Tremko, Tim Grimm, P. J. Soles, Thom McFadden, Zachary McLemore, Morgan Paull, Richard Cummings, Jr., Robert Forster, Christopher Ogden, Bo Hopkins, Timothy Bottoms and Isaac Hayes

Some people apparently have an affinity for horror movies that are set on holidays. This one, which features an American soldier, killed in action in Kuwait during Operation Desert Storm, then rising from his grave on Independence Day to murder his way through his living townfolk who aren't showing enough patriotism, features a couple of names we've met already. The director is William Lustig, who brought so much chaotic fun to St. Patrick's Day with *Maniac Cop*, and the first face we see is that of William Smith, who was a police captain in that film but was later blown up in his RV on Memorial Day in *Memorial Valley Massacre*.

He's in this third one to be driven to a downed helicopter in Kuwait, one that was shot down by friendly fire, leaving those on board burned up in the wreckage. "These things happen in war," Smith explains to his men in the patented half-growl that has served him so well in roles like these over decades, albeit not quite as far back as his child acting days in early forties films like *The Ghost of Frankenstein* or *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*. It's what happens next that isn't so expected.

Smith, whose major has no name, orders a soldier into the helicopter to try to identify any of the bodies from dogtags. The grunt does, but then the charred corpse of Master Sergeant Sam Harper promptly comes to life, snaps the soldier's neck, steals his handgun and empties it into him and through him into the major too. "Don't be afraid," he snarls, "It's only friendly fire." Then he relaxes back into death. Yeah, that's unusual, but it

only gets more unusual.

Back home in the town of Twin Rivers, there's a signed photo of Sam Harper on Jody Baker's bedside table. It falls, apparently of its own accord, waking Jody, who promptly steps on the broken glass and cuts his foot, at least a couple of drops of his blood ending up on this picture of his literal Uncle Sam. It's been three years since the prologue, apparently, but Sam's still in that helicopter, where his corpse may have just felt that moment of connection. It's surely no coincidence that he's promptly found and Sgt. Twining shows up to give the news to Sam's widow in person.

What's telling here is the reaction. Harper was a hero, says Twining, eligible to be buried with full military honours. Yet we're not getting that impression from his family. His widow Louise's first response is, "My God, he's not alive?" Even his sister, Sally Baker, is hard pressed to say anything positive, even though Jody apparently idolises him. Bringing back his body and laying it to rest isn't remotely going to be the cathartic act we might expect. It's like neither his sister nor his widow want him back in their house, even dead. "This'll be a 4th of July we'll never forget," they foresee.

There's a real depth here, even though we don't know quite where it might lead us yet. Next morning at school, Jody shows Sam's medals to his class and it turns out that Mr. Crandall, who taught Sam and now teaches Jody, was a conscientious objector during the Vietnam War. Jody points out that Sam calls people like him cowards. He doesn't, he emphasises, but Sam does, which is an important distinction even if it makes for an even more awkward class.



This has even more resonance today, because of the verbiage used. Mr. Crandall diplomatically says that those who left the country to avoid being drafted considered it a “lesser evil” than following any orders that they believed to be unjust. Jody sits back down and says to himself that, “When I’m grown up, I’m going in the army, just like Sam did,” then adds, “And I’ll do whatever the president says to do, because he knows better.”

*Uncle Sam* was released in 1996 during the time that Bill Clinton was successfully campaigning for re-election, so this may be a commentary on the fact that Clinton, then Commander-in-Chief, had opposed the Vietnam War and even organised an anti-war event while he was studying abroad at Oxford. He didn’t dodge the draft per se, but he was never called up and that was a frequent criticism during his previous presidential campaign. I’m writing twenty-four years on, with Donald Trump as president, a man who has also received criticism for avoiding service in Vietnam, through having his eligibility reclassified due to supposed bone spurs.

With Independence Day celebrations tending to include the most overt patriotism anywhere on the American calendar, with the Stars and Stripes a constant visual at parades, carnivals, barbecues and other traditional 4th of July events, it seems appropriate for this horror movie to ask a simple, seemingly straightforward question, namely what it means to be patriotic.

That’s a massive question in America as I write, with an ongoing debate about whether patriotism means to be loyal to the United States or to its president and whether the one automatically mandates the other. That’s neatly personified in the classroom here by Mr. Crandall believing that he



was loyal to his country and not his president but Sam apparently holding the opposite view and Jody stuck in the middle. We wonder where the film will take this young man and us both and we soon realise that, as much as this is a slasher movie, it's also a real coming of age drama for Jody. We have no doubt that he's a good kid, but he's already going through a lot in this tumultuous time, his worldview challenged from all sides, even before the first death scene.

Certainly, while we wonder whether Sam could be both a war hero and a bad man, the possibility of that is made crystal clear through the other characters. Twining has been upstanding thus far, the steadfast bearer of bad news and willing support to the bereaved. Now we discover that he's "batting .750" with the widows and that's the precise reason he signed up for the job. We meet Ralph, Sally's boyfriend, who has played Honest Abe in the Independence Day parade for the last five years, but he's really a lawyer who screws the government by helping corporations avoid paying taxes. "I'm just smarter than they are, Jody, that's all." These aren't good men, any more than the morons in the cemetery spraypainting swastikas on gravestones and burning the American flag are good men. It's when ashes from that flag float down into Sam's open grave that he wakes up, climbs out of his coffin and wanders off to teach the unpatriotic a lesson, whether that be the cemetery racists or an Uncle Sam using his large stilts to peep into girls' bedrooms.

And outside any simple good guy vs. bad guy philosophy, he takes care of business in patriotic fashion. He spraypaints one of those idiots red,





white and blue before burying him in his own grave and runs another one up the flagpole with the rope around his neck. And, quite frankly, there's so much cheating, disrespect and outright corruption at every level of this town, from its congressman down to its sack race competitors, that there's no shortage of worthy candidates for patriotic death at the hands of our Uncle Sam in his borrowed Uncle Sam suit. Many are brought to ironically appropriate ends too, like Lincoln being shot in public, and the body count adds up nicely from the slasher movie perspective. None of the victims are good people, or at least they've all done bad things, so we're unable to feel too badly for any of them in slasher context, but we can't forget that this particular killer is a hero in the eyes of the world that didn't know the real him and, while he may believe that he's still doing his patriotic duty, he's really a bad guy just like everyone else.

A lot of people apparently found *Uncle Sam* confusing and unwilling to explain itself, as if slasher movies usually make sense, but the themes in play are clear to me. For one, it's about good guys and bad guys and how that already hard to define boundary taps into patriotism and service. It's telling that Jody firmly believes that, were Sam alive and present at the Twin Rivers Independence Day celebration, he would be the one to stop the killer. That's not a statement about him not knowing what's going on, it's a statement about him seeing his uncle as a good guy not a bad guy. For another, it's about victims, because everyone in this film is able to function in society but the ones who matter, when it comes down to it, are the damaged. Oddly, that's not so much Louise Harper and Sally Baker,



who we discover are both victims of Sam Harper, going back a long way. It's Sgt. Jed Crowley and it's Barry Cronin, who end up being easily the two most interesting characters in this film to me. It's they who help Jody find a way to end what's going on in Twin Rivers.

Crowley is very possibly the only good man we meet in the picture and he's played by Isaac Hayes. He served his country in Korea, so he's a good man in the traditional patriotic sense, though he lost both his entire unit and his right leg in the process. He's clearly suffering from survivor's guilt and there's probably some PTSD in there too, but none of that stops him from being a good man in a town full of bad men. He takes Jody aside during Sam's funeral because the boy wants to see his prosthetic leg and tries to talk him out of his dream of following his uncle into the forces. "Be a doctor. Save some lives," he tells him. "Forget about killing." Jody isn't ready to listen, of course, but he gets there.

Barry is a kid Jody's age who was crippled one year earlier when his friends did something stupid with fireworks. Now he's facially scarred, very possibly blind and certainly confined to a wheelchair. Yet, he has a strength that is more than just a will to go on; there's something else in him that tends only to show up in horror movies. He simply *knows* things.

Independence Day is generally thought to be the commemoration of that moment when the thirteen British colonies decided to no longer be British, to forge a new nation, but that's not strictly true. That moment happened, legally, two days earlier on 2nd July, as the Second Continental Congress voted to approve the Lee Resolution, through which Richard



Henry Lee of Virginia had proposed independence. What we know today as Independence Day really commemorates the approval of the resulting Declaration of Independence, which was a public statement that codified the intent behind what Congress had already done. It had been prepared by the Committee of Five, which included two future presidents, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, along with Benjamin Franklin and a couple more notables who are less remembered today: Robert Livingston later negotiated the Louisiana Purchase while Roger Sherman was the only man to sign all four of the crucial founding documents. It changed a lot over two days but it was approved on 4th July.

Nitpicking about historical details aside, what this day means to most Americans today is independence and everything that springs forth from that, from the American Way to the American Dream and all the other things that make Americans American, even though an impressive array of them came much later, through the Constitution eleven years on, the Bill of Rights two years after that and a whole bundle of seventeen further amendments, up to and including the 27th, proposed in 1789 but not ratified until 1992, not to mention all of the other cultural, military and legislative changes that continue to shape the country.

It's the notion that this country is still being shaped that leaps out at me here, especially at a time when, with the controversial appointment of Amy Coney Barrett to the Supreme Court, we've discovered originalism, a particular interpretation of the Constitution that asserts that everything in it must be interpreted based on the original understanding "at the time



it was adopted”. Its antithesis is the concept of a Living Constitution that interprets based on current reality. If this film were a jurist, it would go with the Living Constitution without a doubt.

And so, while *Uncle Sam* may be Jody’s coming of age story, he’s just the representation of the people of the United States within the picture. The biggest theme this movie has is to ask those of us in the cheap seats if we should come of age as well and if we’re ready for that and it’s summed up very nicely in a poem that William Smith wrote and recited over the end credits.

It begins, “I am the marine on the border of Kuwait. I am the soldier; only God knows my fate. I am the sailor in a sea where I might die. I am the pilot breathing Hell from the sky.” It sounds patriotic, if not jingoistic, but it develops and it’s well worth reading. It’s a question to the people and their leaders, just as this movie is. Neither preaches politically and neither takes a political side, but both ask what it means to be American and I hope everyone who watches *Uncle Sam* grasps that and thinks about it. After all, if being American is about doing the right thing, even when it’s difficult to do, then most of the characters in this picture aren’t really American at all and yet we might recognise quite a lot of them in society today, amongst our circles of friends or amongst our leaders.

That’s a scary thought, especially on a holiday that commemorates the independence of a country and the start of the definition of the principles behind it, just about as scary as the idea that an undead American soldier might come back to life and help purge us.







## THE MAID (2005)

*Ghost Month*

Director: Kelvin Tong

Writer: Kelvin Tong

Stars: Alessandra de Rossi, Chen Shu Cheng, Hong Hui Fang and Benny Soh

While I've learned quite a lot about western holidays through watching horror movies, I've learned a lot more about eastern holidays by watching anime. It was *Urusei Yatsura* that taught me about Children's Day, the last day of Golden Week, on which Japanese tradition is to hang koinobori, or windsocks shaped like carp. Given the plethora of fantastic Asian horror movies, made in Japan, Hong Kong, Thailand, South Korea and a host of less expected countries, I wish more of them were set on Asian holidays like that one, but, for now, I'll settle for *The Maid*.

It's a feature from Singapore but it explores Chinese customs because it takes place throughout Chinese Seventh Month, often known as Hungry Ghost Month. Buddhists and Taoists believe that, during Ghost Month and especially on Ghost Day, the fifteenth day of the seventh month, the gates between the lands of the living and the dead are opened and ghosts walk among us. So they perform rituals and venerate the dead, especially their own ancestors. They burn incense and fake money and even leave food out for the ghosts. Many other things come to light during this film, which begins with Seventh Month and ends with Seventh Month.

For a start, it begins with Rosa Dimaano contemplating the start of her new life and it's as multicultural as the last paragraph might suggest. She's travelled to Singapore to work as a maid, leaving her uncle and younger brother back home in the Philippines. She'll be living with her employers, the Teos, who run a famous old Chinese Opera troupe. They seem to be a pleasant couple from the start and, acknowledging the inevitable cultural differences, explain to Rosa—and, by extension, we, the viewers—that it's

important to avoid bad luck during Seventh Month and that depends on doing, and, just as importantly, not doing a whole bunch of things.

For instance, if you go swimming, always be sure to return before dark, and if someone calls you while you're walking alone, don't turn back. Not having the benefit of the Teos to educate me, I googled others and found that you shouldn't kill moths, move furniture around or even hang your laundry outside to dry overnight. That's because the moth might be your relative, ghosts might try on damp laundry and come inside with it and renovations may disturb them if they're already there.

Unfortunately for Rosa, Mrs. Teo doesn't run through the whole list, so her new maid ends up committing quite a few different cultural faux pas, enough to surely prompt the arrival of bad luck. Not all are obvious until we read up on the subject, but some are promptly called out. For instance, one night she notices the Teos in front of their house, burning money in the street, calling out "You go your way and I'll go mine. Please leave us alone." In the morning, she goes about her duties and, perhaps naturally, starts to sweep up the ashes from that money. Mrs. Teo quickly stops her, because it's for the ghosts, but the deed is done and can't be undone. It's going to be upsetting to ghosts, she thinks, and it promptly is because, as Rosa walks back into the house, a ghost grabs her legs and suddenly it's night time, at least for a moment until Mrs. Teo calls her and suddenly it's day time again with no ghost anywhere to be seen. That's a good shock moment and it's a great way to let us know that we can't necessarily trust what we see any more.

The next scene is crucial too. Rosa finds an outfit in a bag under her bed and puts it on. Going downstairs, Mr. Teo doesn't answer her when she wishes him a good morning, though he doesn't seem to be that wrapped up in his work painting stage curtains. She goes out to post a letter but the mail boy on a bicycle doesn't speak to her either, though he does point her to the postbox and give her some stamps. And, at the point she mails her letter, she wakes up and we realise that it was all a dream, What's freakiest is that she then gets up and walks through the same steps for real but with completely different responses. Clearly, not only is she seeing ghosts now



but they may be trying to tell her things, which naturally prompts us to question why. Another little detail has Mrs. Teo upset again at the news that she went out and that she knew where the postbox was, ostensibly because Rosa shouldn't be talking to strangers. She'll happily post all her letters for her, she says, and we just have to wonder if she's being caring or controlling.

Things definitely seem off here, but how much of this is Hungry Ghost Month and how much the Teos? We can read the signs either way or as a combination of both. Certainly, there's bad luck in the area, as Mrs. Teo points out the next day when they go out and find a crime scene. "This road no good," she says. "Bad luck." A little boy who was playing football in the street got hit by a truck. It might seem politically incorrect, but we could even extend that bad luck to the Teos' son, Ah Soon, who's mentally handicapped. Mrs. Teo says that she had him too late in life, but bad luck is so pervasive an idea at this point that it's almost a supporting character in the film, and it shows up in the most unlikely ways. For instance, the Teos have a performance scheduled, so Rosa goes with them to watch. She takes a seat in the only empty space in the front row and only gradually realises that everyone's looking at her funny because everyone else in that front row is a ghost. It's reserved for them and they're not happy that she's intruding.



It's worth highlighting here that this isn't just Ghost Month, it's Hungry Ghost Month, and that has some ramifications to it. Ghosts in many Asian cultures are generally benign. When we die, we become a ghost and slowly weaken until we die a second time. Those we leave behind, especially our descendants who have a traditional obligation to respect their ancestors, shouldn't be scared of us at all, but might help us move forward through tailored rituals and overt continued respect. However, hungry ghosts are another matter.

Hungry ghosts show up if we die in a violent, unhappy or neglectful fashion, as we might find ourselves driven emotionally to inflict some sort of revenge on those who wronged us. We become not merely ghosts, but hungry ghosts, and that's an entirely different matter, especially during Hungry Ghost Month, when the gates to Heaven and Hell have opened and we're right back among the living with dangerous agendas. Lots of Asian cultures do much to ensure that hungry ghosts don't cause them trouble, even if they aren't actually guilty of anything, playing it safe as it were.

In fact, this sometimes gets taken so seriously that it can manifest in rather ironic fashion. For instance, the primary force behind *The Maid* is Kelvin Tong, who wrote and directed it, making his name in the process by breaking Singapore's box office record for a horror movie and winning the European Fantastic Film Festival Federation's award for Best Asian Film.



Tong has made more features since, including *The Faith of Anna Waters*, a supernatural movie made in Singapore but with a pair of Hollywood leads. I was fascinated to read in *Today*, the Singaporean newspaper, that, given that he shot that particular picture during Chinese Seventh Month, he lit joss sticks during production and explained to any spirits present that they were just making a movie. Production managers made sure to visit each location to make their offerings and say their prayers to guarantee a smooth shoot there. Western filmmakers who make horror movies don't usually buy into the supernatural logic driving their features. Apparently, things aren't quite as straightforward as that in Asia.

There are moments here that I don't claim to understand and expect that there are cultural reasons for them that I'm unaware of. One obvious example is a scene where Anna is folding pillowcases and storing them in a closet, when she's scared by a ghost. Recoiling, she falls into a stack of boxes which tumble onto the floor and two big black scorpions crawl out of the top one. However, she isn't stung, she may not even notice that the creatures are even there and they play absolutely no further part in the story. It would seem particularly strange to me if the filmmakers obtained a couple of scorpions for the shoot and made them so obvious within the scene without any reason for doing so. Even if they were merely there, by some fluke accident, given that scorpions aren't generally found inside the city in Singapore, would that not prompt the filmmakers to put them to a better use? It seems fairer to buy into them being used for a very specific purpose to tell the audience something very specific but, as I'm neither Singaporean nor Asian, I merely have no idea what that is.

Fortunately, this is a very accessible Asian horror movie for a western audience, because Tong is willing to explain a lot of things in his script. Of course, he's willing to explain them in his own time, thus leisurely as he deems appropriate, and we tend to learn what we need to know after the fact, an approach that really helps the freaky feel of this movie. There's also a back story in play that we only gradually learn about, so revelations about ghosts and interactions with them pair with more revelations about secrets that we need to learn in order to unravel the plot. Put together,

this often becomes Hitchcockian in style. Certainly there's a chase scene that's a neat homage to Hitchcock, using a variety of local architecture in artistic fashion, and, in many ways, *The Maid* is a Buddhist take on both *Vertigo* and *The Sixth Sense*, which I realise is a rather wild combination and not everything you might assume from that is the case, because the keys to the mystery can only be found in Chinese culture. For instance, who's a ghost and who's a hungry ghost? How can we tell the difference?

I can't talk much more about the story, because it would be very easy to venture into spoiler territory and you should unpack this nest of secrets without that, so I'll point out instead that I liked this when I first saw it in 2008, probably on the Sundance Channel, as part of its *Asia Extreme* series, but I liked it even more when I watched it afresh. It feels loose, suggesting that most of Rosa's experiences in Singapore during Hungry Ghost Month are hallucinatory in nature and follow rules that she's not entirely aware of either. It's made crystal clear that she sees ghosts and she physically interacts with them too, but it's up to her (and us) to figure out what's real and what isn't, especially when we factor in the crucial detail that ghosts may well be real in this context because, hey, we're just not in Kansas any more, Toto. In western movies, there might be one character who can see ghosts, but it's usually the case that nobody else does, leading to a clear psychological interpretation. That's wildly different in eastern movies like this where ghosts are taken for granted.

All the actors are interesting and, in some ways, they neatly mirror the characters they're tasked with bringing to life. For instance, Mr. & Mrs. Teo, a couple who serve as one more generation in a traditional Chinese Opera family, are played by actors who audiences in Singapore are likely to know. Chen Shu Cheng and Hong Hui Fang have both done a lot more television work than film but they each have expansive filmographies and appear to have performed together on some of the same TV shows, such as *Unbeatables* and *The Teochew Family*. However, Alessandra da Rossi might have been new to them, appropriately as Rosa the immigrant maid from the Philippines; she wasn't new to movies, with a dozen titles behind her, plus five years on a TV variety show, but all were Filipino productions, so

she may well have been a fresh face in Singapore. By the way, her unusual name for an Asian star is because she was born in England to an Italian father and a Filipina mother and she grew up in Italy.

In short, she fits really well as a cultural outsider and, as an Englishman in the American southwest, I understand culture shock well. This film is surely deeper to Singaporean viewers but, clearly, Tong is looking at how Singapore treats its immigrant workers who may come from cultures that are very different indeed, even mentioning how Filipino maids often find boyfriends in Singapore and so run away from their employers.

Singapore and the Philippines are both southeast Asian countries, but it's a sixteen hour flight between them, so they could hardly be described as next door neighbours. What's more, they're fundamentally different in many other ways. Singapore is a former British colony with a population that's 76% Chinese and a third Buddhist, while the Philippines is a former Spanish colony whose ethnicities speak eighteen recognised languages, on top of Tagalog and English, and 90% are Roman Catholic. That means a lot of linguistic and religious differences for a Filipino maid in Singapore to navigate, especially one who's living with her native employers, and that's before we start to factor in Chinese Opera and hungry ghosts.

I'd love to hear what a native Singaporean would have to say about this film. There are certainly a lot of Filipino maids there, with a quick google



telling me 70,000 with a thousand more arriving every month, but are the Teos typical employers, for good or for bad? Do these maids really run away because they find boyfriends or are they reacting to culture shock that may become overwhelming to them if their employers refuse to allow them freedom to breathe? With every fifth household in Singapore having a maid, their range of experience must be notable.

It wouldn't surprise me to find that this script grew out of a national conversation and this fictional horror story is simply commenting on real life horror stories. That's pretty standard for western horror movies, after all. If so, I love how Tong used the wide swathe of customs, superstitions and traditions that surround Chinese Seventh Month to highlight a social tale in horror clothing. It makes me appreciate this all the more.



Scary stories about death,  
hell and hungry ghosts.



A Horror Movie Calendar

the maid

In cinemas 18 August

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 ALESSANDRA DE ROSSI 陳淑萍 洪慧芳 蕭雅珊 主演: AUR ADAL YONAH AS AGAN 郭武玲 MEHO HAZAD DIN ROSAM 主演: 唐永健 謝永健 林淑芬 吳麗珊  
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 監製: DANIEL LIM 監製: RON LEE 監製: LAURENCE ANG 監製: LOW HWEI LING 監製: INFINITE FRAMEWORKS 監製: CHIU HAI SHING 監製: ALEX OH 監製: JOE NG 監製: JOE NG  
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## **BLACK FRIDAY (1940)**

*Friday the 13th*

Director: Arthur Lubin

Writers: Kurt Siodmak and Eric Taylor

Stars: Boris Karloff and Bela Lugosi

It's 1940 and Boris and Bela are facing the worst horror of their careers: camping outside Walmart the day after Thanksgiving to bag one of them there big screen TVs! Well, not quite. This isn't that Black Friday, it's just a Friday the 13th which looms heavy on the calendar that sits behind the opening credits.

Once they're done, we visit Boris Karloff in his prison cell as he readies to start his procession to the electric chair. He's Dr. Ernest Sovac, though most of the characters here seem to call him Ernst, and he appears to be a pleasant old man. It's surely telling that he's dressed entirely in white and everyone else is in black. Even the guards seem to respect him and allow him to hand his notes to one of the journalists present; the only one who was fair to him, he explains. And, as he walks off screen to his death, that journalist opens up that notebook to read and, hey presto, we launch into a feature length flashback to explain why the good doctor is about to be executed. And, whether it's Friday the 13th inside the prison or not, it certainly is in the flashback.

Dr. Sovac's reminiscences are entitled *Notes on the Case of George Kingsley* and it's Prof. Kingsley who we discover teaching poetry at the University of Newcastle. It happens to be the end of the semester and he explains to his avid students that he may not return the next year, though that has precisely nothing to do with the doggerel he promptly quotes from Sir Joshua Peachtree, whom I believe was invented for this picture. At least I hope so, because it's pretty awful stuff. Perhaps the studio thought that the estate of William McGonagall might sue the production company, just in case it was one of his.

It reads as follows:

*Thou who breakest glass will find Fate can be, oh, most unkind:  
Under ladder walkest thee, most unlucky thou wilt be;  
Each dread Friday do take care, else thou fallest down the stair.*

He's really referencing a "very large university in the east" which says that it's interested in him, but we can't ignore all these superstitions and omens, right? It's Friday the 13th and Kingsley is tempting fate with bad luck poetry in a film called *Black Friday*. We shouldn't remotely forget that it's also Karloff the Uncanny who's about to drop him at the train station either, as he doesn't drive; the Sovacs are family friends of the Kingsleys and Dr. Sovac's daughter, Jean, is even one of the professor's students.

I should point out here that Friday the 13th serves well as the beginning of this movie but doesn't really play any further role as it unfolds. Friday the 13th has become a horror day, because of the franchise of that name, which debuted in 1980, but *Friday the 13th: The Series*, which was otherwise unrelated to the movie storyline, went back to the earlier idea of bad luck. The proprietor of the central antique store full of cursed objects in that show is Lewis Vendredi, a surname that means Friday in French.

Before 1980, Friday the 13th simply meant bad luck to the superstitious. This film uses it to taint everything that follows with bad luck, almost as an excuse. Yes m'lud, I did every one of those horrible things I'm accused of but it's all the fault of the universe because I stubbed my toe on Friday the 13th and it all went downhill from there, honest.

Surprisingly, this is a relatively new phenomenon, dating perhaps only as far back as the 19th century, though each half goes back further in wild superstition: Fridays and the number 13. Nobody has definitively provided the source for all this, though it may go back to Jesus being one of thirteen at the Last Supper before he was crucified on Good Friday. Most historians seem to plump for the arrest of the Knights Templar by Philip IV of France on Friday, 13th October, 1307, in large part so that he could confiscate the substantial wealth they'd amassed.

Oddly, there are Friday the 13th equivalents in other cultures that vary from the form we know. In Spain and Greece, for instance, their bad luck day is Tuesday 13th, while in Italy it's Friday the 17th. In fact, while *Friday the 13th* was released in Italy with a directly translated title, *Venerdì 13*, the later parody version, *Shriek If You Know What I Did Last Friday the 13th*, was titled *Shriek—Hai impegni per venerdì 17?* instead, because of that difference.

This movie capably manipulates our superstitious expectations. I liked all its little hints that something's going to go horribly wrong, only for everything to turn out perfectly fine. The best is when Margaret Kingsley warns her husband to watch the traffic; halfway across the road, he drops his umbrella, bends down to retrieve it, turns around to happily wave at her through the passing cars and yet still somehow makes it safely over.

I also liked the stuntwork in play, though, when he does get his, as we surely knew he would sooner or later. There's a gun battle between two cars that are barreling along together, and one knocks Dr. Kingsley over as it ploughs into the building behind him. It's very capable stuff indeed.



And, with that relatively quick disaster done with, we promptly set up the next, much slower one, which aficionados of Universal horror movies will find to be rather odd in its approach, for two reasons: one because of how the central idea affects the story and the other because of just whose story this is. While the stars are Karloff and Lugosi, almost a decade into their horror careers, all this really revolves around Stanley Ridges.

Who is Stanley Ridges, you might ask? Well, he was a British actor, like Karloff, who had taken his career to the States. Beginning on Broadway as a song and dance man, he became a capable romantic lead but struggled to translate his stage career to the screen. He found his place as a character actor in the late thirties, knocking out eight films in Hollywood's golden year of 1939, including *Union Pacific*, *Each Dawn I Die* and *Espionage Agent*. He'd do even better in the forties, with memorable roles in *Sergeant York*, *To Be or Not to Be* and *The Suspect*, not to mention the 1943 B-movie, *False Faces*, in which he was given what may be his one and only true lead role, but, arguably, there are only two parts for which he'll be best remembered



and they're the two that he plays in this film: absent-minded professor, George Kingsley, and vicious gangster, Red Cannon.

How come he gets two roles? Well, Dr. Sovac is a brain surgeon and he's eager to save his friend's fading life; he does so by transplanting the brain of the gangster who ploughed into him into Kingsley's body.

And here we pause, because most of you are going to be questioning that. If we've learned anything from a hundred horror flicks built around brain transplantation, it's that everything that makes a man is stored in his brain and that doesn't change even if you transplant that brain into another body. When Dr. Frankenstein placed a criminal's brain into his nascent monster, it directed the creature's actions in an aberrant fashion, right? So, when Dr. Sovac moves the brain of Red Cannon into the body of George Kingsley, it must be Cannon who will wake up from the surgery?

Well, not here! It's Kingsley in control with Cannon lurking somewhere behind him, ready to come out when needed. We rail against this for most of the picture until we're finally let in on the crucial detail that *only part* of Red Cannon's brain was transplanted. That's not what it says in Dr. Sovac's notes, though, so I wonder if they "fixed" it later and hoped nobody would notice such an obvious problem. Maybe that's why co-writer Curt Siodmak would revisit the idea two years later with his novel, *Donovan's Brain*; its first screen adaptation would be in 1944 with *The Monster and the Lady*.

The oddest thing in *Black Friday* isn't the script, it's the casting choice. According to Glenn Erickson, reviewing *The Bela Lugosi Collection* for DVD Savant, Karloff was planned for the double role of Kingsley and Cannon, while Lugosi was to be Dr. Sovac. I can see that, and it would have made more sense at the time than bringing in someone like Stanley Ridges who wasn't known for the horror genre in the slightest.

However, Karloff was apparently unconvinced that he could do justice to two quintessentially American characters, a small town professor and a fiery gangster, and so decided to play the doctor instead. He's great as Dr. Sovac, of course, but it isn't remotely a stretch for him and Lugosi, who would be even less likely to be believable in this double role, was relegated to the smaller and less important one of Eric Marnay, who had worked for

Cannon but then orchestrated his murder so he could take over his gang instead. We're never given a reason why this New York gangster should have an eastern European accent, but then Lugosi ran into that problem in most of his film and scriptwriters had given up on explanations by then.

What stood out most to me was that the morals are different from the norm. Usually, it's the act of transplantation itself that prompts us to see a character as the bad guy because this whole subgenre of horror came from *Frankenstein*, a pre-Victorian gothic novel with a subtext that pits science against religion. Sure, many of us know people who have benefitted from kidney or even heart transplants, but back then it was surely beyond the pale because Man shouldn't be playing God. Who's storing the torches and pitchforks? We need to march on the castle!

That mentality lasted in the horror movie genre for decades and still hasn't quite gone away to this day, but Siodmak's script, written with Eric Taylor, never judges Dr. Sovac for transplanting a brain. It's illegal, that's for sure, but we never really get into the morality of it and it's certainly not why he ends up on death row. The suggestion is that he performs this surgery for the best of reasons, to save his friend, but later discovers that Red Cannon has half a million dollars hidden away and that discovery sets him on an inevitable path to his downfall, driven by greed rather than "playing God".

So, this apparent *Frankenstein* story is really more of a *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* story, with Prof. Kingsley a much loved Jekyll and Red Cannon taking the villainous Hyde half of that personality. The two battle for dominance, of course, with Cannon taking firm advantage of his new disguise to get revenge on those who attempted to murder him; Kingsley gets more and more confused at the whole thing, because he keeps losing time and can't figure out why.

The why of it all is Dr. Sovac, of course, because he's dazzled enough by the prospect of a fortune, which could allow his work to progress freely, to put his friend at serious risk. When he realises that Kingsley is exhibiting signs of Cannon coming through, he pushes that hard. He takes his friend to New York and books them into Cannon's regular rooms at the Midtown

Hotel, where he hurls pointed questions at him as Kingsley falls into sleep, so that he'll wake up with the gangster in control, a gangster whom he believes he can blackmail into sharing the location of that money.

I enjoyed Karloff's performance here, though Lugosi's is far from his best. I won't spoil his worst moment, but the man who personified Count Dracula pleading in a broken voice is a pitiful thing indeed. He does try, but he can't find his feet as a New York gangster the way his cohorts can.

William Kane is Paul Fix, the marshal from *The Rifleman*, who was just as good in villainous roles as he was in heroic ones; Frank Miller is Edmund MacDonald, well known for film noir roles with dark sides; even Raymond Bailey does exactly what he needs to do as Louis Devore, even if we don't recognise him as Milburn Drysdale in *The Beverly Hillbillies* a few decades later. Lugosi could look tough in his sleep, but that thick accent hurts him here and we never buy into him taking over this gang from Cannon, whom Ridges plays so well that we have trouble initially believing that it's the same actor we've been watching as the gentle Prof. Kingsley. Perhaps he's



aided by the make-up needs being for Kingsley rather than Cannon, but most of it his him; it's a superb contrasting performance.

And, frankly, Ridges steals the film, which is no small feat for someone tasked with acting with both Karloff and Lugosi in 1940. I utterly bought into the confidence of Ridges as Cannon; there are some wonderful scenes where he visits his old flame, a singer called Sunny Rogers, and carries on with her as if nothing had ever changed, even though he's literally living in a new body that she fails to recognise. Siodmak and Taylor handle all the careful little details to confirm him as Cannon superbly. I also utterly bought into Ridges's absent-minded act as Kingsley, who is well and truly established first.

The best scenes are ones where he blurs the boundaries between the two. Cannon has a favourite bellhop at the Midtown, for instance, who uses the distinctive knock that he's mandated. When Kingsley shows that he knows it too, the bellhop turns to leave the room, then realises what happened, pauses, starts again and then stops, because he almost walked into the ominous frame of Boris Karloff. That's an awesome combination!

Karloff and Lugosi made seven features together, eight if you count *Gift of Gab*, but this isn't the double act that we know from *Son of Frankenstein*, *The Raven* or *The Black Cat*. In fact, they don't share a single scene.

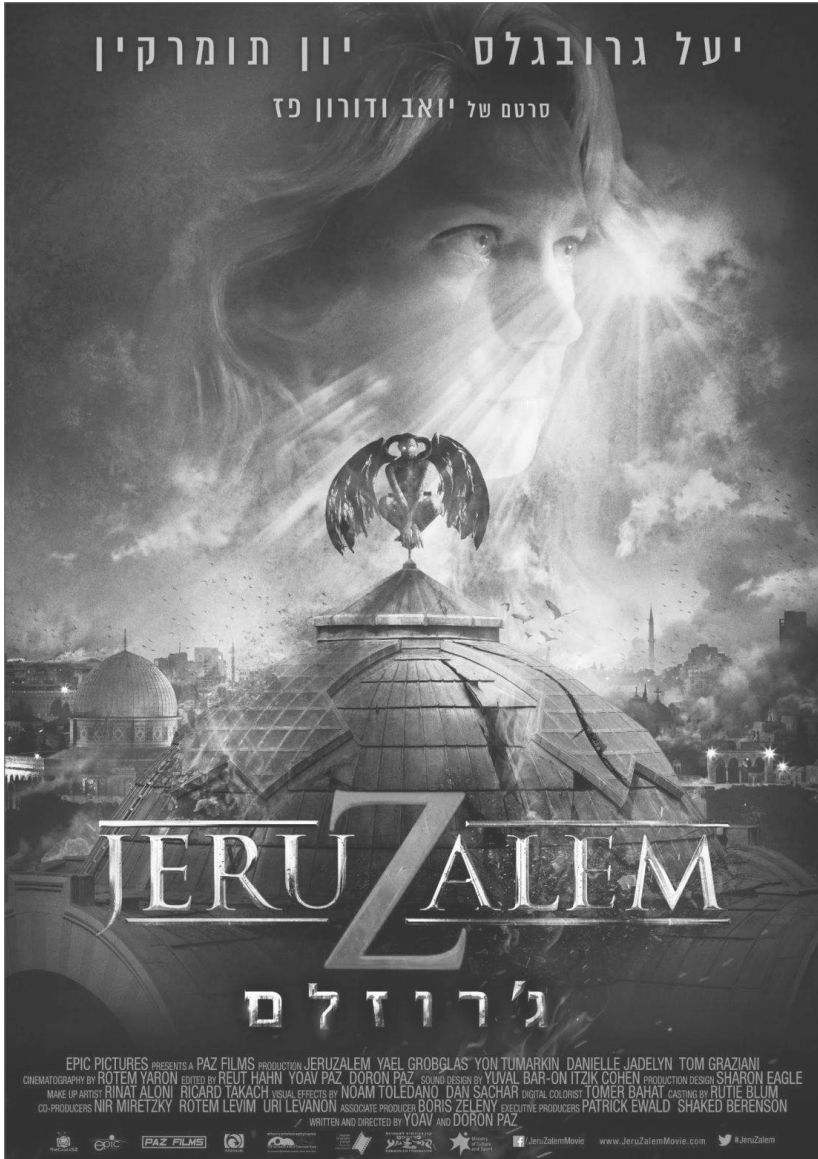
It's well worth watching for Karloff and it's interesting for Lugosi but, of all of their films together, this is the one to watch for someone else. I wonder if Universal ever asked Stanley Ridges back for another horror movie; they wouldn't cut their output until later in the decade and could easily have used someone with the skills he ably demonstrates here. From what I can tell, the only other horror movie he ever made was a Republic picture from 1945 entitled *The Phantom Speaks*, in which he plays a doctor whose body is taken over by a murderer; it's a completely different story but the similarities are obvious just from that brief synopsis.

One reason that these old horror movies work so well is because they were cast from quality actors who merely happened to be playing horror. Icons like Vincent Price, Basil Rathbone and Peter Lorre, not to leave out Boris Karloff, were magnificent in horror movies but took their substantial



talents with them when they shifted to other genres. Here, Ridges has the vibe of Claude Rains, who could do *The Invisible Man* and *The Wolf Man*, then switch to *Casablanca* and *Here Comes Mr. Jordan* without blinking. It's sad that Ridges didn't have as much opportunity.





## JERUZALEM (2015)

*Yom Kippur*

Directors: The Paz Brothers

Writers: The Paz Brothers

Stars: Yael Grobglas, Yon Tumarkin, Danielle Jadelyn and Tom Graziani

It's a real shame that *Jeruzalem* took so many wrong turns because it had the potential to be insanely good. It's certainly original in many ways and simply pointing out what it is ought to underline that for you.

It's a zombie movie, the title stylised as *JeruZalem* as a way to highlight that. It's an exorcism movie. It's a religious apocalypse movie. And it's also a found footage movie, if in spirit rather than precise detail. And, now that you've imagined what the end result has to be like, I'll happily point out that you're completely wrong.

Let me add that it's an Israeli film, made on a skimpy \$160,000 budget raised by the Paz brothers, Doron and Yoav, who also wrote and directed. No, that won't help either, because all of that is misleading.

Their initial ideas take this in highly original directions: those zombies are more like demons, the religious aspect is neatly interdenominational and underplayed, it looks bigger than its budget and not one frame is shot on a camcorder. It's also primarily in the English language, as the leads are a couple of young American ladies. Does that help?

The opening sequences are a much better way to introduce the movie and they're neatly creepy. They unfold in that jagged scrapbook style we know so well from *Se7en*, but with a strong grounding in religion that isn't from the usual Christian sources. There's a quote, of course, but it's from the Talmud, the primary source for Jewish law and theology, stating that there are three gates to Hell: one in the desert, one in the ocean and one in Jerusalem.

There's a narration as well, which is delivered awkwardly but with an appropriate sense of doom, suggesting that the city of Jerusalem is so full

of hatred that it runs deep into the ground. One consequence of this is shown in video form, recorded in 1972 by a couple of priests on reel to reel tape. A woman died of typhus three days earlier, but returned home from the grave. Christian, Jewish and Muslim priests attempt an exorcism over multiple hours to no avail. When she vomits worms and sprouts leathery wings, one of them shoots her dead. "This concerns all of us," they say.

Now, that's my sort of opening!

Fast forward to today and a pair of well off American girls prepare to set out for Tel Aviv on a holiday. Rachel Klein has talked her friend Sarah Pullman into going to help her get over the death of her brother, Joel, in an accident a year earlier. It's here that we learn which technology we'll be seeing the film through, because her father gives her a Smart Glass as a gift. As you might imagine, this is a generic, movie safe version of Google Glass, the smart internet-connected glasses that sparked so many privacy concerns, but that's not the point of their usage here.

Smart Glass is simply a much more convenient and more stable way for us to see through Sarah's eyes than a camcorder and one that features a host of applications and overlays that are used ingeniously, from facial recognition to navigation. I wondered if the Paz brothers had seen *Sight*, an excellent short Israeli film from the Bezalel Academy of Arts that I've screened a number of times in Apocalypse Later roadshow sets, because the integration of this technology into film isn't entirely dissimilar, even if the social commentary is very different.

Two soon become four and stay that way throughout. Sarah hits it off

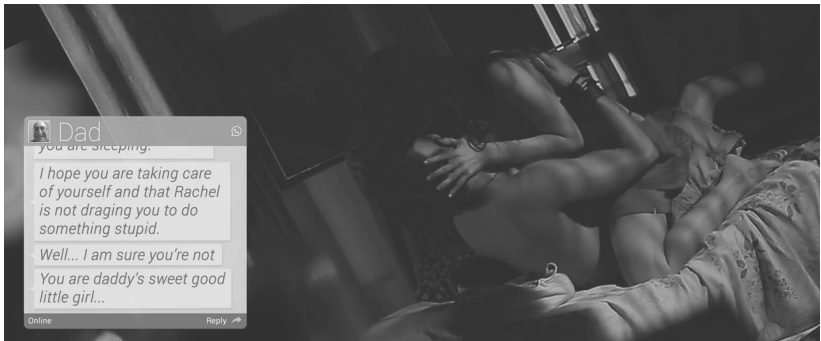


with Kevin Reed, an anthropology student, during the flight to Israel and he talks them into going with him to Jerusalem instead of Tel Aviv. Once there and collectively installed in a very cool hostel called the Fauzi Azar Inn in the Muslim Quarter, Rachel hits it off with the owner's son, Omar, who becomes their tour guide through the city.

And here's where we start to realise what this movie is doing right and what it's doing wrong, which is important because it keeps on doing both until the end credits run. On the positive side, the use of locations is truly astounding and there's a very natural feel that plays off those locations to make the movie feel both vibrant and utterly grounded in history. On the negative side, Sarah and Rachel are both shallow, while Kevin doesn't add the depth he should, beyond sharing that 1972 video with Sarah, as he'd found it on the darknet during research that otherwise never comes into play. This religious horror film has surprisingly little religious depth.

And that's odd, because the reason I'm reviewing *Jeruzalem* is because, when all hell breaks loose—perhaps quite literally—it happens on Yom Kippur, the holiest day on the Jewish calendar, the Sabbath of Sabbaths, and there are a couple of obvious reasons why the Paz brothers chose that date in their script.

One is clearly because of its religious significance. Yom Kippur is the Day of Atonement, on which Jews seek repentance by atoning for past sins in the synagogue. Their expectation is that sincerely acknowledging sins and repenting for them, thus promising not to commit them again in the future, will prompt divine forgiveness, or at least self-improvement. An



extra layer comes through Jews also believing in divine judgement. If sins are committed but not atoned for, then Yahweh might prompt a disaster, like He did in Biblical times with the Flood, the plagues of Egypt and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, and that imagery leads us right into the apocalyptic themes that naturally leap out of the apparent discovery of a literal gate to Hell.

The other is the Yom Kippur War of 1973, because Israel, perhaps a little overconfident in its military might after their wild success in the Six Day War in 1967, was notably blindsided by a surprise attack by a coalition of eight Arab states, led by Egypt and Syria, and they suffered major initial losses. That attack happened on Yom Kippur, surely with deliberate intent, so the date now inherently carries overtones of vulnerability to Israelis, though it is important to note that Israel did turn the tide rather quickly, successfully mounting counter attacks into both Egypt and Syria and, within fewer than three weeks, winning that war outright. Almost exactly at the halfway point of the film, Sarah is on a rooftop overlooking Jerusalem when two jet fighters scream overhead firing missiles at the Old City, causing huge explosions. The ensuing chaos is neatly intense to begin with but still escalates gloriously; it can't fail to leave every occupant of the city with one thing on their mind and that's the Yom Kippur War.

Of course, we know that it's no terrorist or foreign attack, as we've had three quarters of an hour of foreshadowing to prepare us, even if we consumed most of it through osmosis. Sarah and Rachel are too concerned with having a good time to pay attention to the cool stuff that Omar has



been showing them in the city, but we pick it up. Great tension comes out of the feelings of claustrophobia from the walled-in streets and the caves below the city.

I learned a lot here about the neat geography of Jerusalem, such as the presence of a five acre limestone quarry underneath five city blocks in the Muslim Quarter; it's called King Solomon's Quarries or Zedekiah's Cave. It's far from the only tight space that we visit and there's also a historical weight that hangs over the city. Unlike the aliens, kaiju or regular zombies we find in most found footage horror movies, whose existence is defined by rules set down in the scripts, here we're at the very heart of millennia of history. Hey, let's run that way, down the *Via Dolorosa*. You know, the route that Jesus took to be crucified.

I have to admit to being rather frustrated by what this could have been, though I do acknowledge both the originality in play here and the lack of a huge Hollywood budget. I was surprised by the quality of the CGI in some scenes, as we catch glimpses through wall cracks or windows of what are striding through the city as if they own it, though these are both few and fleeting. A larger budget would have made a big difference here, but they do well with what they have.

My problems come from the film moving from a character based drama to a full on zombie apocalypse rather than spending some time building the background that we need to fully appreciate what's happening on this particular Yom Kippur and why. There are certainly hints at racial hatred, Omar bristling whenever he encounters an Israeli soldier, whether in a bar



or in the street, but this never becomes too overt. Kevin seems to know something, though he can't find a way to get it out before he's diagnosed with Jerusalem Syndrome and locked up. This is real, by the way, as a host of tourists have acquired religious obsessions or delusions simply through visiting and had to leave the city for a few weeks to recover from it. How horror movie is that?

Sadly, my biggest disappointment came during what should have been a triumphant moment late in the movie. I won't spoil it, but there's a point where the wonders of modern technology reveal something that would have been very cool if it hadn't been telegraphed so outrageously earlier in the film. I get the impression that the Paz brothers knew precisely what they wanted to do here, but lost the focus they needed to make it really work somewhere along the way and so it went off in more commercial directions.

I'm sure that budget restrictions were a contribution to that, but there are deeper problems with the theme. For instance, Rachel is Jewish and it may be that Sarah is too, but neither are devout and they treat their trip to one of the holiest cities of three major world religions with annoying flippancy. It would seem that their relation to their own faith and a lack of acknowledgement of their own sins ought to be pretty important here, given that they're in Jerusalem on Yom Kippur, but, if that's even touched on, it's only on the surface.

Instead, they become almost random tourists caught up in a random apocalypse, albeit in a glorious location for a horror film, with the reasons

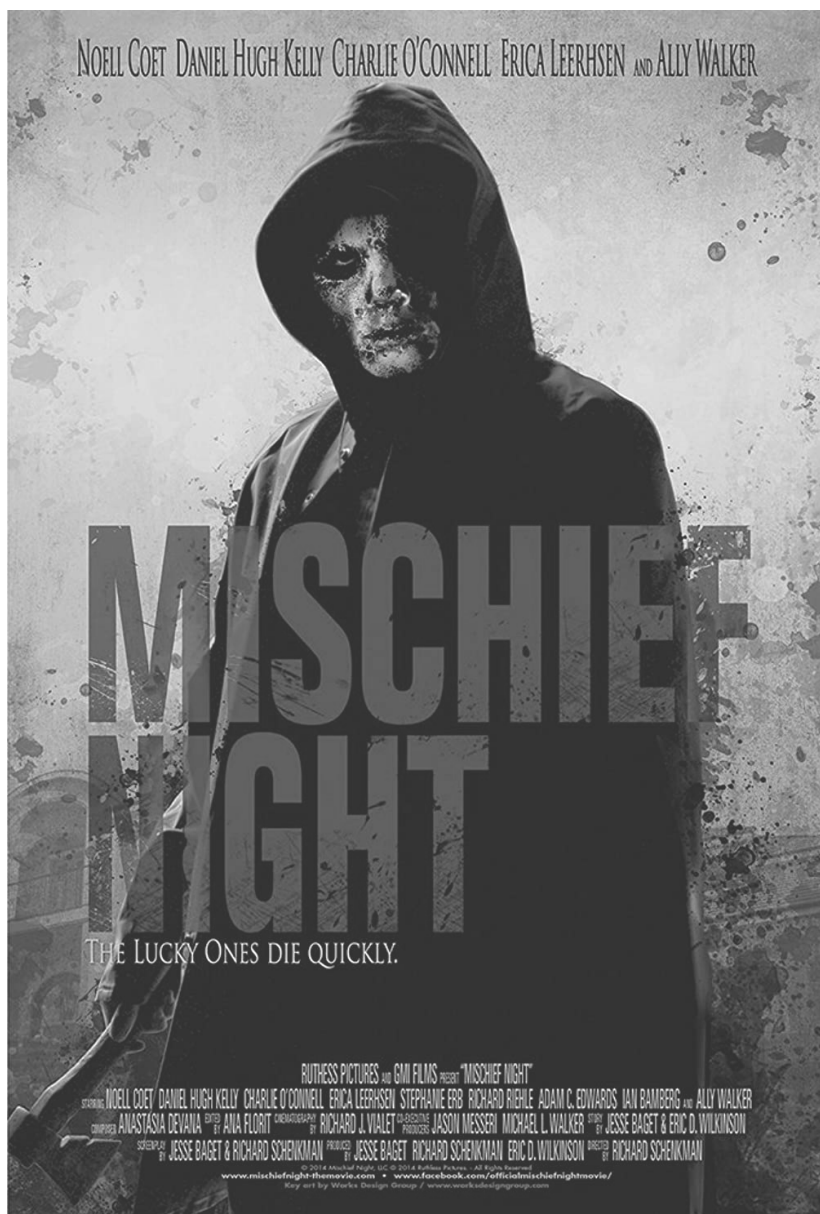




for it practically lost in the mix. The logic applied to help them escape the city isn't sourced from religious works or any of the anthropological texts Kevin has studied, but from modern zombie movies. There's even a brief moment where it seems like Sarah is playing her zombie game again, the one she used to test her new Smart Glass back home in the States.

By that point, I was hardly sympathetic to any of the characters still alive, though I will admit that a number of them leave the film in fantastic fashion. And that kind of underlines my point. I can't praise *Jeruzalem* as a film without stumbling across fatal flaws, but I can't decry it without the clichés falling away to highlight just how much admirable originality sits at its heart. It's too bad to be good but it's too good to be bad and that gets frustrating.

And, at the end of the day, frustrating is the best adjective to use. It's a character-driven script in which the characters aren't much of a draw. It's a "handheld film" that I can enjoy without getting motion sickness. It's a zombie movie that adheres to rules set down for that genre but delivers something completely unlike any zombie you've seen elsewhere. It's a religious movie that has precious little religion in it. It's an apocalyptic movie where the apocalypse is its own reward; we never fully understand why it happened to begin with, even though it should tie to its setting on Yom Kippur. It's a war movie that might be traumatic to Israelis because of what memories it might evoke but it doesn't actually contain a war at all. It's a multiracial, interdenominational picture that mostly forgets that race and religion ought to be at the heart of everything. And it's an Israeli film primarily in English. It isn't any of the things that we expect it to be and it isn't what it could have been, which is something utterly unique.



NOELL COET DANIEL HUGH KELLY CHARLIE O'CONNELL ERICA LEERHSEN AND ALLY WALKER

# MISCHIEF NIGHT

THE LUCKY ONES DIE QUICKLY.

RUTHLESS PICTURES AND GMI FILMS PRESENT "MISCHIEF NIGHT"  
STARRING NOELL COET DANIEL HUGH KELLY CHARLIE O'CONNELL ERICA LEERHSEN STEPHANIE ERB RICHARD RIEHLE ADAM C. EDWARDS IAN BAMBERG AND ALLY WALKER  
WRITTEN BY ANASTASIA DEVIANA EDITED BY ANA FLORIT PRODUCTION DESIGNER RICHARD J. VIALET PRODUCED BY JASON MESSERI MICHAEL L. WALKER STYLING BY JESSE BAGET & ERIC D. WILKINSON  
SCREENPLAY BY JESSE BAGET & RICHARD SCHENKMAN PRODUCED BY JESSE BAGET RICHARD SCHENKMAN ERIC D. WILKINSON DIRECTED BY RICHARD SCHENKMAN

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## **MISCHIEF NIGHT (2013)**

*Mischief Night*

Director: Richard Schenkman

Writer: Richard Schenkman, from a story by Jesse Baget and Eric D. Wilkinson

Stars: Noell Coet, Daniel Hugh Kelly, Charlie O'Connell, Erica Leerhsen, Stephanie Erb, Richard Riehle, Ian Bamberg, Adam C. Edwards and Ally Walker

There are a few movies named for and set on the surprisingly old but unofficial holiday of Mischief Night, but I had to pick this one because it's a Richard Schenkman film, his first since one of my very favourite modern science fiction features, 2007's *The Man from Earth*. Yet I watched it, wrote a bunch of notes but not a review, came back to it three years later and realised that I'd forgotten the entire thing.

Finally putting virtual pen to paper on an actual review, I wonder what it really does and why. It's obviously a holiday horror, because the entire film takes place on two different 30th Octobers, with almost all of it taken up with the mischief of Mischief Night. These particular mischiefmongers do more than hurl eggs though, so it becomes a home invasion movie, one that benefits from an additional trick up its sleeve, even if it also loses out on back story and motivation. But, and here's the kicker, none of it really matters, at least in the way that we expect it to matter. It all matters for a completely different reason that we've completely forgotten about by that point in the film.

We know that the mischiefmaker on whose mischief we focus, whoever he is (and we're never given a name, a background or even a connection), is notably serious about his mischiefmaking because of the intro sequence, which amounts to a full tenth of the entire movie.

It's routine until it isn't, with Kim enjoying a traditionally romantic bathtub rendezvous with Will while her husband is away in Tokyo. There

are red petals and candles everywhere and Will is gonna rip her to shreds, in the most romantic way, of course. But what's that? Is it a noise? The microwave is messed with and there's no dialtone. It's just kids, suggests Kim, messing around on Mischief Night just like she used to, but I'd be far more concerned knowing that these particular kids are inside my house and they've found and cued up a sextape I recorded with a partner other than my spouse.

Really, there are two notable things happening here. One is that there are absolutely zero naughty bits on display in a film that kicks off with a couple getting it on in a bathtub. The other is Will asking, "What the hell is Mischief Night?"

I first heard about Mischief Night in Detroit, because of just how many arson attacks happened in the eighties on what they called Devil's Night. That prompted a response from concerned citizens called Angels' Night, which can see up to 40,000 volunteers patrolling the streets to keep them safe from criminals. In Baltimore, however, it's Moving Night, because the traditional illegal activity there is stealing porch furniture. With a mindset that it's OK to do something illegal on this one night of the year, it's not difficult to see where a concept like the Purge came from. When the father of the leading lady was growing up, he knew it as Cabbage Night, which some American states and Canadian provinces still do today, where the tradition is to throw cabbages at each other and at cars or houses. Others go with Gate Night, because of the thinking that the gates of Hell open this night before Hallowe'en. Mischief Night, however, is the name it carries in New Jersey, New York, New Orleans and a bunch of mostly northern states that don't happen to begin with New.

This leading lady is Emily and she's in therapy but not for anything to do with Mischief Night. At least, not yet. She's seventeen and her trauma goes back to when she was eight, when her mother crashed the car with her in the back seat. She was found in the snow almost frozen to death, attempting to seek help after her mum died. For no apparent reason, she clearly blames herself. "It was my fault," she emphasises to her therapist, Dr. Pomock. However, she also claims not to remember what happened,

which contradiction is surely the reason why she still has psychosomatic blindness after nine years. She can't see a whit, but there's no medical reason for it that anyone has found. Once she comes to terms with what happened, says Dr. Pomock, her sight will return.

And, just so you don't forget that, I'll point out that this movie, in a truly bizarre way, constitutes Emily coming to terms with what happened. Perhaps the message here, folks, is that a home invasion is better than therapy, it sure doesn't take nine years to get results and the bill is likely to be a heck of a lot lower.

I found it easy to like Emily, as stubborn as she initially seems to be in her therapist's office. In there, she looks completely normal. Outside, she sports dark sunglasses and walks with the aid of a white cane that folds away neatly in sections. When she gets home, she's almost as functional as you and I, even though she hasn't lived in this particular house for more than a few months. And you'll recognise the house, for it's the same one we saw earlier, where more than mischievous kids presumably murdered Will and quite possibly Kim as well. Who knows?

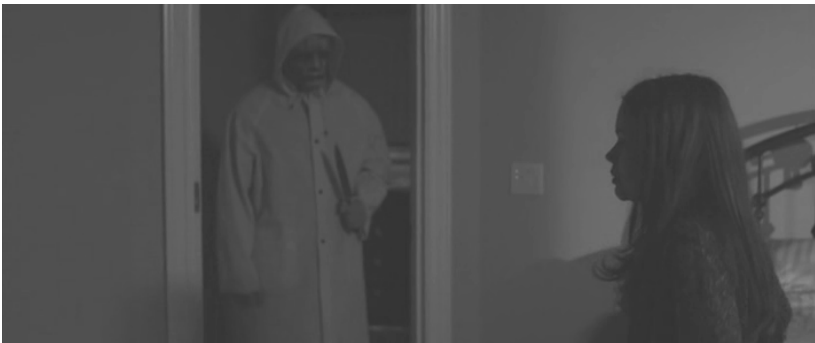
I'd have liked a lot more exploration in this film of what it means to be psychosomatically blind, especially early on and in a brand new house, but Schenkman, who also wrote the script from a story by Jesse Baget and Eric D. Wilkinson, doesn't entirely ignore it. Clearly, Emily is mapping out the place in her mind, which is important when she she's raiding the freezer, cooking food or noting mentally where a glass bowl dropped and broke on the floor. She's certainly a tough kid, one eager to go to her boyfriend Jimmy's family cabin so that he can teach her how to ski.



There are nice touches on this front early on. She has her headphones on a lot, as if the absence of one sense means that she feels a need to live in another. She has them on when Jimmy climbs in through her bedroom window to surprise her, but she can tell he's there from his smell, just like she can tell that he's coloured his hair or her dad's wearing his lucky shirt, just from the texture.

Actress Noell Cort is nineteen believably playing seventeen and she supposedly did rather a lot of research into blindness before the cameras ever rolled. I'm not entirely convinced about her blindness because her head has a rigidity to it and she seems to read Braille with all ten fingers, but I've seen a lot worse portrayals. She endows Emily with guts too; that glass bowl was on a counter but she knocked it off while climbing up to switch off a smoke sensor, balancing almost on the edge. I'd have thought she would have switched off the lights in her home invasion scenario a lot sooner; that's something I've seen often in other thrillers featuring blind leading ladies. Sometimes they don't switch them on to begin with.

And yes, we get a home invasion, presumably by the same dude in a yellow windbreaker who tormented Kim and Will in the intro, however many years earlier that might have been. It's actually quite refreshing to see her just ignore him, being blind and all. He's steadfastly clichéd in how he shows up in all the places and all the poses that we expect, but where the usual victim/heroine would scream and run, Emily just goes about her business, blissfully ignorant of where he is and what he's doing, even once she realises he's inside the house.



I liked that the majority of the film hangs on Emily's shoulders because the other characters who flit in and out are never in it for long. Notable actor Richard Riehle, in particular, is dead and gone after only a couple of lines. Even Jimmy isn't there particularly much and he's Emily's boyfriend. Why not? Well, that's a very good question, but it certainly has something to do with getting up to mischief on *Mischief Night*, albeit hopefully a lot less serious mischief than *Yellow Windbreaker* guy.

What I didn't like, on the other hand, is quite a lot of the rest, because the home invasion in this home invasion movie is, quite frankly, the least interesting thing about it. I liked Emily greatly, so she had my sympathy from the very beginning and I honestly wanted her to figure out why she's psychosomatically blind. I liked her dad too, who's not there on *Mischief Night* for a really good reason: Emily has talked him into going on his first date in nine years, with her former maths teacher. He's David and he's played by McCormick from *Hardcastle & McCormick* (or Ryan from *Ryan's Hope*, depending on your tastes), Daniel Hugh Kelly. I liked Aunt Lauren, played by Stephanie Erb, who shows up at the house at one point. And, though to a lesser degree, I liked Emily's boyfriend, Jimmy, even though David is fair when he calls him an idiot. Of course, Emily is fair with her reply too: "Well, duh! He's an eighteen year old boy. They're all idiots." I'm really not used to the people targetted by home invaders in movies being likeable, so that's rather refreshing.

What isn't refreshing here is the home invader. I'm not supposed to like home invaders in movies, but I am absolutely supposed to dislike them, to hate them and even to fear them. I'm supposed to feel a strong emotional response to them in some form and, quite frankly, ache for a swift and entertaining demise for every goddamn one of them, even if there's some sort of traumatic event in their past to prompt a little bit of sympathy too. Here, every one of the feelings this film tore from me was for the family, because *Yellow Windbreaker* is a complete nonentity.

We have less back story on who he is and why he's doing a heck of a lot more than mischief on *Mischief Night* than we do on the Shape in the first *Halloween* movie. Literally the only back story we have is that this isn't a

new thing for him, because we saw him with Kim and Will in the intro. I'm even assuming that Yellow Windbreaker is male, because it's fairly within the bounds of possibility that she's female, even if I personally doubt it. The only thing I can be sure of about Yellow Windbreaker is that he, she or it is an emphatic MacGuffin.

Now, I should emphasise that it's the home invader who's worthless here, not the home invasion, because there's a key distinction to be made there. There are certainly some decent scenes to enjoy, especially the ones featuring a chainsaw on a pole, and there's some capable misdirection in play that's introduced in a subtle fashion so that not everyone watching will register it immediately, and that's always fun.

Of course, there's a drinking game that seems obvious as well and that's never a good thing. Take a shot every time someone says "Stay here!" and you'll shift quickly from a state of dehydration to falling over drunk. So I guess it's swings and roundabouts as far as the home invasion goes, while the abiding question is why the home invader behind it is so forgettable.

No wonder this film played almost entirely fresh to me after a mere three years. In some films, like *Halloween* and *Duel*, the filmmakers wanted their "villain" to be non-human, a personification of evil itself, so having a back story wouldn't have helped at all and would have actively hindered. I'd love to know Schenkman's reason.

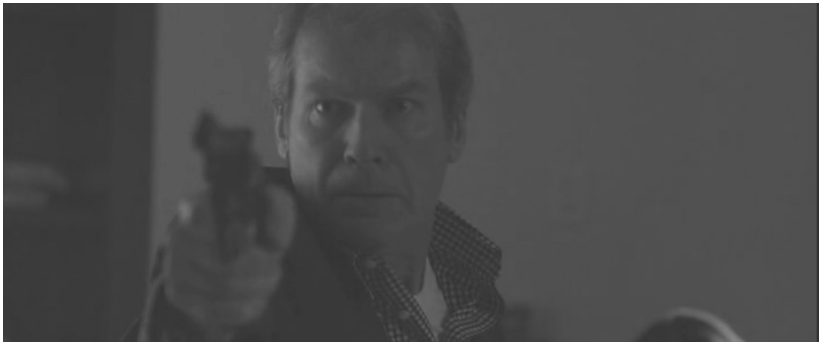
Maybe I should have gone with a different *Mischief Night*, as there are quite a few, all of them pretty recent.

The earliest that I found was from 2006, a British comedy drama about a white family and an Asian family connecting on Mischief Night, which is shockingly British in origin. It's still a thing in northern England, it seems, though it's often held the night before Bonfire Night (Guy Fawkes Night)—no wonder I failed to notice it—instead of the night before Hallowe'en and its origins in the 18th century seem to surround May Day.

One year after this *Mischief Night*, two showed up in 2014. One is a crime drama about a gang of kids, unoriginally dubbed the Misfits, whose deeds (or misdeeds) get a bit out of control one Mischief Night. The other is a stalker horror that looks like it may take a sideways turn into a Stockholm



Syndrome type romance; then again, the cast features the ever-interesting Malcolm McDowell. Finally, due next year, as I write, is a feature which may well be called *Mischief Night* now instead of *Untitled Killer Clown Statue Project*, which is a good change, I think. Maybe in a new edition.



A Horror Movie Calendar

POISON, DROWNING, CLAW, OR KNIFE.  
SO MANY WAYS TO TAKE A LIFE.



# Trick 'r Treat

WARNER BROS. PICTURES PRESENTS  
AN ASSOCIATION WITH LEGENDARY PICTURES A BAD HAT HARRY PRODUCTION A FILM BY MICHAEL DOUGHERTY "TRICK 'R TREAT" DYLAN BAKER ROCHELLE AYTES  
WITH ANVIA PADWIN AND BRIAN COX MUSIC BY DOUGLAS PIPES COSTUME DESIGNER PETER LHOTKA EDITOR ROBERT IVISON PRODUCTION DESIGNER MARK FREEBORN DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY GLEN MACPHERSON, A.S.C.  
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WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY MICHAEL DOUGHERTY

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## TRICK 'R TREAT (2007)

*Hallowe'en*

Director: Michael Dougherty

Writer: Michael Dougherty

Stars: Dylan Baker, Rochelle Aytes, Anna Paquin and Brian Cox

And so to Hallowe'en (or simply Halloween), the most horror holiday of the year, a horrorday if you will! I avoided *Halloween* partly because it's too damn obvious a choice, but also because something on the cover of my DVD of *Trick 'r Treat* kept bugging me. It's a quote from the website of the Wizard Universe, the forerunner of Wizard World, and it states that this is "the best Halloween film of the last 30 years."

Now, it's obvious to everyone reading that they're really saying "since John Carpenter's *Halloween*, which came out in 1978", but I'd actually call this easily the best Hallowe'en film, period, as it isn't just a horror film set on Hallowe'en, as so many others are; it's a distillation of the fundamental rules of Hallowe'en into movie form, which most are not. It didn't get a wide release, only playing a handful of film festivals over the couple of years until it hit home video in 2009. It was critically acclaimed but there's never any guarantee that the moviegoing public are going to see eye to eye with the critics and this one has sadly remained an underground hit, though I have to say that the size of the cult is thankfully growing.

It may well be the epitome of the movie to throw on every year on the holiday in question. You could watch *Halloween* any day of the year and it would be just as good, but *Trick 'r Treat* gains some magic when viewed on Hallowe'en, preferably late at night after the trick or treaters have gone home and you can slouch back in your comfiest chair with a beer or three.

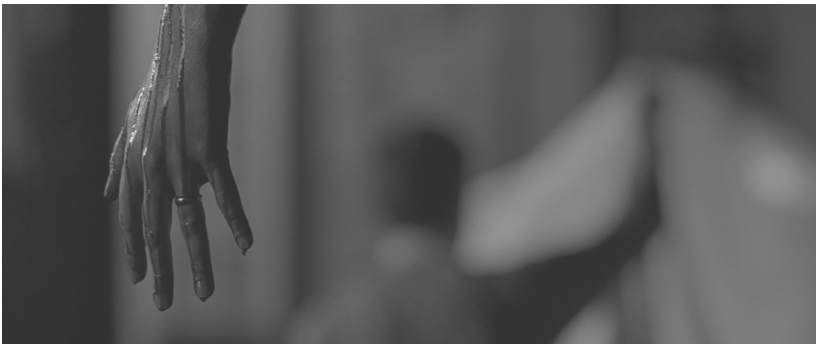
It's an anthology film but it's an unusual one because, unlike most such creatures which merely hurl out random, if perhaps themed, short films inside a framing story, these stories are interwoven. All four take place in roughly the same place at roughly the same time. The place is Warren

Valley, Ohio and the time, of course, is Hallowe'en night. There's a fifth piece as well, but one shorter than the others and it serves as our framing story, mostly there to set us up for what's yet to come. It features a couple returning home from the carnival atmosphere in town and, while Henry is a huge fan of Hallowe'en, Emma is not. In fact, as she starts taking down their Hallowe'en decorations, she outright states, "I hate Hallowe'en". And that's really not good, at least in the context of this movie.

As we find as the entire film wraps, her doom was set when she snuffed out a Jack-o'-Lantern too early, but there are plenty of other people in this town who aren't living up to the spirit of Hallowe'en either, for one reason or another, and, at this point, they've all met an appropriate end already. However, this plays out of order so that we'll need to go back to find out what happened in the interwoven segments. It's fair to say that three of them end with a mildly hokey but gruesome twist in good old fashioned EC Comics poetic justice style, while the fourth and last is more surprising and serves to explain the movie's logic in a neat way.

Put together, they send a message to acknowledge and adhere to the traditions of Hallowe'en. Violate them and karma, in the form of an iconic trick or treat monster called Sam, will take you down. But follow them and karma, even if you deserve its visit, might leave you alone, at least for the time being. It will be back, at some point, because karma always will be, but following the rules might save you then too.

The first segment is about Steven Wilkins, who's the local principal by day and a budding serial killer by night, but karma isn't there for him yet;



it's there for Charlie, an overweight slob of a kid who has absolutely no respect for the rules of Hallowe'en. As we meet him, he's getting his kicks smashing all the pumpkins he walks past on the street. Then he walks up Principal Wilkins's path to steadfastly ignore the sign instructing him to only take one piece of candy. At this point, when Wilkins catches him in the act, plops him down on the steps and talks to him about tradition, we think he's just doing his job as a principled principal. But, as he explains to him that he should always check his candy, we realise what else is going on. Charlie chokes to death, because the candy has been poisoned. That's not really a spoiler, by the way, because it's hardly the end of even this segment, which features much more irony. I particularly liked Wilkins's son shouting down from upstairs, "Charlie Brown sucks!" Of course, that's not tradition either.

While this first segment features plenty of setups for each of the later three, we eventually realise that we've moved into the second. It's for the trick or treating kids who we saw stop at Principal Wilkins's house, and Mrs. Henderson's too, though they do try to forget that she is both drunk and midway through a costumed orgy.

Macy is the group's leader and her angel costume is acutely misleading. She takes the others to a quarry and tells them all a spooky fireside story about a school bus that's been sunk beneath the waters of the lake at the foot of the quarry, a bus that still holds the bodies of the eight mentally handicapped kids whose parents paid the driver to murder them. If that wasn't politically incorrect enough, the whole thing is a setup for Macy to



scare the crap out of Rhonda, who's clearly somewhere on the spectrum herself, perhaps being a savant. There is sensitivity here and I thoroughly appreciated the diversity in play, but the real winner is karma, because Macy really shouldn't have kicked a jack o'lantern into the lake.

We've seen recognisable names already, though Tahmoh Penikett and Leslie Bibb weren't as prominent at this point as they would soon become. Dylan Baker was much more notable at the time and he's perfectly cast as Wilkins, an outwardly respectable teacher with a serious hidden darkness; there's a fantastic shot of him thinking about slamming his knife deep into his own son's skull rather than what they're carving together.

The third segment follows Anna Paquin, though, who was a bigger star again given that she had won an Academy Award at eleven for her debut in *The Piano*; she hadn't started *True Blood* at this point but she had made three *X-Men* movies, so she was a household name far beyond mere horror pictures. Here, she's the pouty virgin in a group of slutty college girls who are in town for a party at Sheep's Meadow. She's especially worried about her first time being special and, quite frankly, it is absolutely special, if not close to what in any way that we might expect. The twist here arrives like it's performance art and it's a fantastic way to connect the segments.

By the time we find ourselves at Mr. Kreeg's house, we're connecting all over the place because we even get a replay of a scene that we saw earlier, merely from the perspective of the other participant. Kreeg is a classic old curmudgeon, someone who refuses to get into the spirit of the holiday at all because bah humbug and all that. When trick and treaters ill advisedly



knock at his door, he has his masked and caped dog Spike chase them off into the night.

But something's inside his house, something that isn't happy about his lack of respect for the holiday. What goes down leans heavily on slasher movie logic but with a very cool new slasher indeed, one I feel completely safe in spoiling because he's on the film's poster and has transcended the movie by finding his way into the wider realm of pop culture. When you're the iconic hero/villain of a decade plus old horror movie and there are animatronics of you at Spirit Halloween, you know you've done your job right. He goes by Sam—presumably short for Sam Hain, the Gaelic name for Hallowe'en that's referenced in the script but isn't pronounced that way in the slightest—and he's a real character.

While avoiding no end of spoilers, because this movie is like a minefield of them, just waiting for me to trigger one and explode in my face, I can safely point out that this fourth segment stars another horror icon in the actor Brian Cox, even if his portrayal of Mr. Kreeg is entirely unlike his most famous role in the genre; he originated the role of Hannibal Lecter in *Manhunter* and, even though he had severely limited screen time, is still My Lecter, far above Sir Anthony Hopkins, however great a job he did, and I still spell the character's name like that as it's the version that I see whenever someone speaks it out loud.

All these stars do a great job here, as do the lesser known names, right down to the debuting child actors Samm Todd and Quinn Lord. Todd plays Rhonda, the cool savant kid in black who adores Hallowe'en and does not



deserve in the slightest to be pranked by the clique du jour on her holiday, while Lord plays Sam, the iconic little guardian of the day and its rules. He's gone on to a busy career, even though we never see his face here, just a mask under a mask.

Since moving to the States, Hallowe'en is the holiday I've taken to most. Sure, I can enjoy distant (and not so distant) fireworks on Independence Day and a big plate of turkey and sides on Thanksgiving, but Hallowe'en is much more fun than either, not least because my eldest son built a haunt in his backyard and I get to work it every year, scaring as many kids (and, even better, parents) as I can. Edit: he moved; it's gone. Crap.

Hallowe'en also has a far better set of traditions than any of the other quintessentially American holidays, possibly because it's so much older, though nobody's found a definitive answer for where it came from. Mostly that's because it's a hybrid of a number of other holidays.

Hallowe'en is a contraction of All Hallows' Eve, hallows being saints, the word having the same root as "holy", and it's the beginning of a three day Christian celebration called Allhallowtide. However, as I noted earlier, it's also the ancient Gaelic festival of Samhain, a pagan day to mark the end of the harvest season and the beginning of winter, halfway between the autumn equinox and the winter solstice.

It's pretty commonplace for Christian festivals to be held on the same dates as earlier pagan ones, because it made it possible for early Christians to celebrate openly without much likelihood of falling foul of the pagan or polytheistic majority around them. Sometimes the best secret is the one





that's right in front of you, right?

While it's easy to see how these Christian festivals on borrowed dates often took on pagan aspects, initially as a disguise and later because they had always been there and were interpreted in a new way, Hallowe'en, on the other hand, is an incestuous combination of both the original pagan and Christian celebrations, because they've each influenced the other over millennia, with further influence from some other cultures that borrowed liberally too. The lineage isn't a straight line, for once, but two lines that turn into a whole bunch of lines weaving in and out of each other.

For instance, Allhallowtide might start with Hallowe'en but it ends with All Souls' Day, whose focus on reverence for the dead gradually morphed into festivals like Día de Muertos, which we know as the Day of the Dead. Add in some entirely commercial considerations like the current fetishes for wearing slutty costumes and programming horror movie marathons, and it all becomes an unholy mess.

If there's a heart to the modern holiday, it might be the Gaelic mindset that on Samhain, just as on Beltane half a year away in either direction, the boundaries between the worlds of the living and the dead are at their weakest. The Celts left out offerings to ensure that they'd stay on the right side of the gods and they lit candles and said prayers before shifting into celebration mode with eating, drinking and playing of games. Activities often involved divination in some form, whether by bobbing for apples or scrying in mirrors. They would go door to door in costume, performing for food and maybe casting dire warnings if that food wasn't forthcoming. As



spirits were abroad, fires were lit and lanterns carried to ward them off. Combinations of these activities led to widespread pranks, hollowed out turnips with carved faces and trick or treating. Meanwhile, Christians also went door to door to pray for the dead, receiving soul cakes in return, and they dressed up as saints if their churches were too poor to own relics of the martyrs.

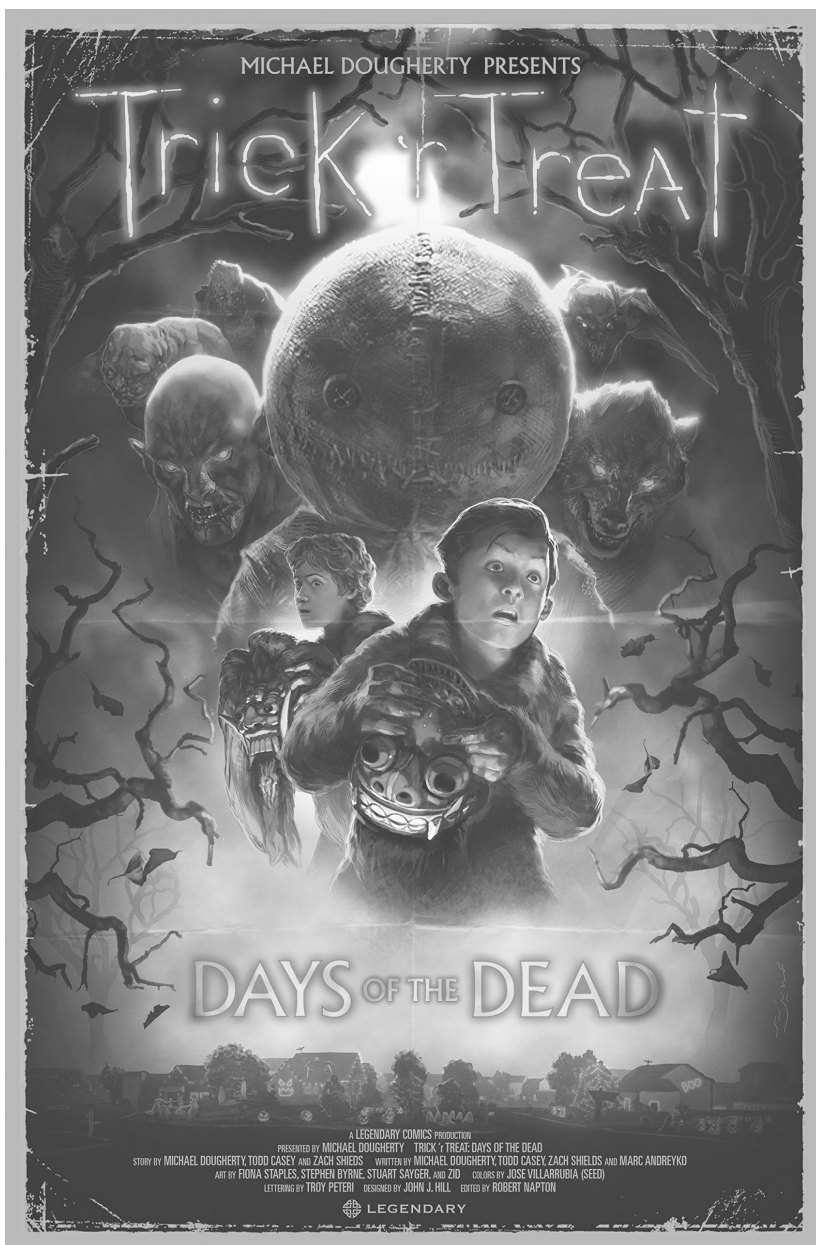
There's so much woven into the fabric of Hallowe'en that entire books have been written on the what, the why, the where and the when. What is perhaps most important to note from *Trick 'r Treat* is that this evolution is not at all over. It remains fluid and popular culture, in the form of books and comics and, especially nowadays, movies, continues to shape it.

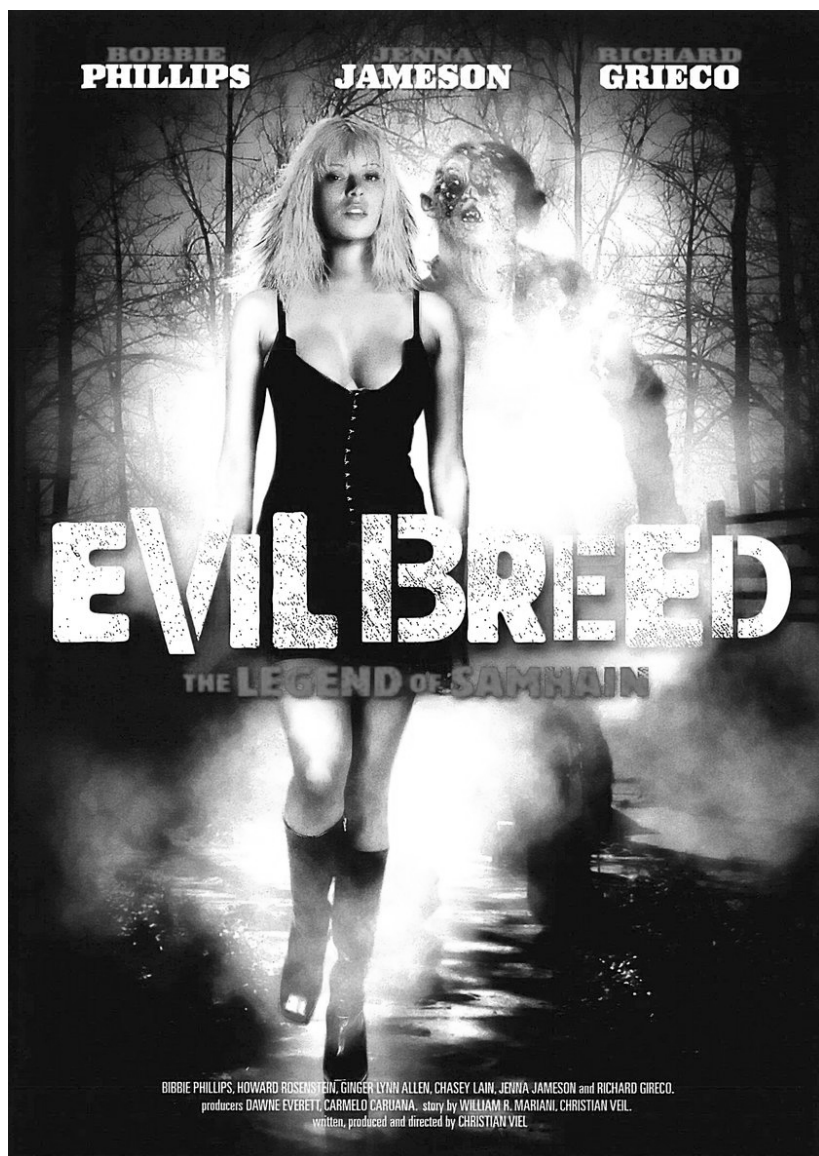
This film, for instance, begins with a brief clip of an old newsreel, a set of warnings for "all ghosts and goblins" going out trick or treating in what we assume might be the fifties and, while I presume it was created for this feature, it's telling that one of the warnings is to "never go to a stranger's house". Nowadays, everyone goes to every house, many for the one and only time a year, unless, of course, the porch light is unlit.

There are certainly rules that aren't mentioned in *Trick 'r Treat*, but that just leaves Michael Dougherty with ample opportunity to make a sequel. A growing audience has been clamouring for one that would serve to update his Hallowe'en ruleset, and he certainly seems willing, having also written one in book form, *Trick 'r Treat: Days of the Dead*, shown opposite.

On film, he's been kind of busy writing and directing new *Godzilla* films, though he did also return horror to Christmas with his film *Krampus*.







BIBBIE PHILLIPS, HOWARD ROSENSTEIN, GINGERLYN ALLEN, CHASEY LAW, JENNA JAMESON and RICHARD GRIECO.  
producers DAWNE EVERETT, CARMELO CARUANA. story by WILLIAM R. MARIANI, CHRISTIAN VEIL.  
written, produced and directed by CHRISTIAN VIEL

## **EVIL BREED: THE LEGEND OF SAMHAIN (2003)**

*Samhain*

Director: Christian Viel

Writers: William R. Mariani and Christian Viel

Stars: Bobbie Phillips, Howard Rosenstein, Ginger Lynn Allen, Chasey Lain, Taylor Hayes, Jenna Jameson, Richard Grieco, Brandi-Ann Milbradt, Lael Stellick, Phil Price, Neil Napier, Heidi Hawkins, Gillian Leigh, Simon Peacock, Alex Chisolm, Robert Higden and Alanah Dash

You know that you're in trouble when a horror movie set on a holiday consistently mispronounces that holiday, especially given an overt focus on why it's important and why it's an especially cool setting for a horror movie. Then again, take a careful look at the poster opposite. You'll see that two of the stars are Bobbie Phillips, also listed as Bibbie Phillips, and Richard Grieco, also listed as Richard Gireco. Christian Viel helped write the story but Christian Viel wrote, produced and directed. Yeah, this isn't remotely promising and I'm going to spellcheck this paragraph at least a dozen times just to make sure it isn't contagious.

The holiday is Samhain, which is a Gaelic word, so is not pronounced anywhere near what you'd think—if we turned the M upside down, you'd be closer—and it's celebrated on the first day of November, making it one of the four Gaelic seasonal festivals, along with Imbolc, Beltane and the one I'd expect everyone to pronounce incorrectly, Lughnasadh.

However, if I'm going to call out these filmmakers—and their marketing department—for getting things wrong, I should take the extra care to get things right and point out that Samhain actually starts on 31st October, as the Celtic day began and ended at sunset, and then runs through most of 1st November, marking both the end of the harvest and the beginning of winter, the darker half of the year in these wintry climes of the north. By the way, when talking about Celtic people, that word has a hard C; when

you use a soft C, as the teacher does in this feature, it's a football club in Glasgow. Basic research is your friend, budding filmmakers!

Then again, maybe I'm digging far too deeply here. We don't have to go too far at all to figure out things wrong with this movie. It opens with the generic Nickelback-esque alternative rock of a band who go without any credit, perhaps because they aren't a band at all, merely a creation of the Russian-Canadian composer Alex Khaskin. Then we wend our way into a tent in the woods so we can watch an unenthused Richard Grieco getting it on with porn star Chasey Lain, who's clearly only in the movie because of her big eyes, dangerous nipples and willingness to be murdered before the opening credits. Grieco is gone by that point too, though he does get to wander a little in the woods muttering "Amy" a lot, wake up in a cave chained to a stone altar to ask "What the hell is this place?" and revolve on a spit, sans all limbs but with pecker intact. The opening credits feature everyone in the cast, I think, highlighting in the process that no less than four porn stars are going to be tasked with actually acting and that never bodes well, even if one of them is Ginger Lynn Allen.

Before she shows up, we suffer through yet another bunch of kids going to yet another cabin in the woods. Sure, this particular bunch are college kids, a skimpy class of five from the Shepley College of Historical Studies, and the cabin is a large brick building Miss Douglas has rented, but still. They're not quite as obnoxious as we usually get in films like this either, but Steve isn't far off; he's the horror nut who likes trying to scare Shae.

While Miss Douglas does worry about her, how she's bright but afraid of having fun, we side with Shae from the very outset, because she actually has substance while the rest, to borrow a line from Steve's commentary on the *Halloween* knock off they watch that night, are all "too stupid to live."

Next up, of course, is the heartfelt warning from an unhinged local, so we can't be particularly surprised when Gary Saxton shows up in the form of Simon Peacock, who's a Canadian Kiwi pretending to be fiercely Irish. "Bad things happen when you stray from the paths," he tells them and he was born on Samhain night so he knows things. He's been cursed with "the two sights", he says, which presumably means clairvoyance.

Peacock is apparently a voice actor and comedian, so we can't be too surprised when his accent is notably better than that of his screen cousin, Pandora, played by Ginger Lynn Allen. All credit to her, I should add, for choosing to not wear any make up and to Pandora for attempting to calm down Gary as he rants on unabated about Samhain still being important: "Bloody sacrifices," he says. "Blessing of the harvest. Feast of the dead."

By the way, as soon as you read the word "clairvoyance", you knew that Miss Douglas's boyfriend, Paul, who's already surprised her by flying in from Dublin for the week, would ask Gary about his future with Karen and you probably also know exactly how he'll reply. "Fortune? Great careers? Marriage, maybe?" Nah. "Death."

There really aren't many surprises here, the main one revolving around how much we're told about the holiday of Samhain because, for a trashy Canadian horror flick, it really is quite the educational watch, more than a majority of the films included in this book. Pandora points out that "the old druids believed that Samhain night was a crucial point in the flow of time and therefore the best night to have visions of the future."

Karen picks that up the next day, teaching the kids overly simplified details at a stone circle that really wouldn't work for a college class, even in America. For instance, in addition to pronouncing Samhain and Celtic



wrong, she promptly trawls out the legend of Sawney Bean, which is from Scotland not Ireland and completely unverifiable to boot; suggesting that some people believe that his descendants moved to Ireland is just a really cheap way to set up the rest of this story. She also adds that Samhain was a three day party to wrap up after the harvest, reports of human sacrifices were just a myth, and that people dressed up in costumes to scare off dead souls, a custom transported to America by Irish immigrants during the potato famine. It's all kinda sorta right, kinda, ish, but it seems clear from just one lesson that, if you can read one Wikipedia page, you'll be sorely overqualified for admission to Shepley College of Historical Studies. Then again, given that Steve is a current student, and he's underwhelmed by an actual stone circle, you'd probably have grasped that already.

I actually felt sad for Bobbie Phillips, because she's a capable actress but Karen Douglas isn't remotely a deep enough part to provide her with any opportunity. The opening credits seem to expect her to carry the picture, though, given that her name is the only one to appear before the film's title; then again, there's one actor listed whose scenes were deleted and whose name isn't even spelled correctly. I know. Who'da thunk it?

Brandi-Ann Milbradt is decent as Shae too, enough that I was surprised to find that she isn't even an actor, the vast majority of her credits being





as a producer with a few more as a writer. Her only other acting role was as a TV reporter in another 2003 feature, *Hatley High*, which she produced. She's given one of the two "introducing" credits here but her big lesson may have been to realise that the best way to get films distributed—this one was shot in 2002 but didn't make it onto home release until 2006—was to become a producer herself and so be responsible for her own business.

Apparently, the film was originally called *Evil Breed* and was both much longer and much gorier. Even here, it does get gory at one point, because, when the deaths start, they keep on coming, but when Lionsgate released it under its longer title, it cut out a lot of material and I have to wonder what this skimpy 78 minute version is missing.

Everything seems to happen at once: an array of varied death scenes, the arrival of a bevy of cannibals in knock off *Toxic Avenger* suits to commit those murders and even some martial arts from Ginger Lynn Allen, which I wasn't expecting. One minute Jenna Jameson shows up, playing a friend of Mark and Amy, the couple who were killed before the opening credits, and the next she's another victim on that busy stone altar, a cannibal ripping her heart right out of her chest and wondering why it looks like a silicone implant. Some versions of the DVD understandably choose to hurl their focus entirely on her, the blurb changed to "Cannibals wreak havoc on Jenna Jameson!" but she really isn't in the film for more than a couple of minutes.

The porn star with the most interesting role is Taylor Hayes, because she isn't here only to be a victim and she isn't treated the way we expect a victim to be used. She doesn't even attempt an Irish accent! Apparently, these cannibals, who are presumably the conveniently transplanted Irish descendents of the Scottish Sawney Bean, don't just need victims for food. Hayes explains to Shae, who has found her naked and bloody in the cave with a dead baby still attached to her by its umbilical cord, that they've inbred for so long that their women simply can't conceive any more, thus explaining why her credit is for "The Breeder". She's lost so much blood that she'll be dead soon, but Hayes almost comes across as an actress, conveying at least some of the emotional void she's had to find to survive

continual rape by non-verbal Irish cannibal monsters. It's perhaps worth mentioning here that Sawney Bean, if he ever existed, which is doubtful, dates back to the time of James VI, so the early 16th century. That would place these inbred cannibals five hundred years down the family tree.

*Evil Breed: Legend of Samhain* seems to exist mostly as a cautionary tale. Obviously, if we should ever take a trip to rural Ireland, we must be careful to not take it during the holiday of Samhain, or, if we do, we should pay heed to the locals when they tell us to keep off the moors, I mean not stray from the paths. On a more meta level, we should pay attention to horror movie logic, as that's specifically brought up. The scene when everyone crowds in to watch a *Halloween* knock off on their first night in Ireland is a surprisingly long one and it's full of everyone poking holes in the internal logic of the film. As soon as it ends, we promptly follow Shae as she hears noises in the dark and wanders around in her bath towel checking them out. And she's the only one of these morons who isn't "too stupid to live" because it's quite obvious from the very beginning that, in horror movie parlance, she's going to be the final girl. And this is a great example of why nothing should be financed by "a massive chocolate and t-shirt sale", as this trip and perhaps this entire movie was.

The story was by William R. Mariani and Christian Viel, with the latter turning it into a screenplay; he edited and directed as well. He's gone on to a career of low budget features, including what looks like a sci-fi action series he expanded from a 2004 feature, *Power Corps.*, into a trilogy with kludgy titles. After *Power Corps.* became *Recon 2020: The Caprini Massacre*, it was soon followed by *Recon 2022: The Mezzo Incident* and *Recon 2023: The Gauda Prime Conspiracy*, all of which feature a number of actors from this movie, merely none of the good ones. I do try to support independent film and I wish Viel well, but I truly hope that he leveraged the experience of *Evil Breed*, his third feature, into learning how to do things much better because this one isn't even as good as its meagre 3.2 rating on IMDb might suggest. Perhaps, if I could watch the original version of *Evil Breed*, before it was ruthlessly eviscerated by Lionsgate as if it was a topless porn star in front of an Irish cannibal, it might even warrant a 4. Inquiring minds want

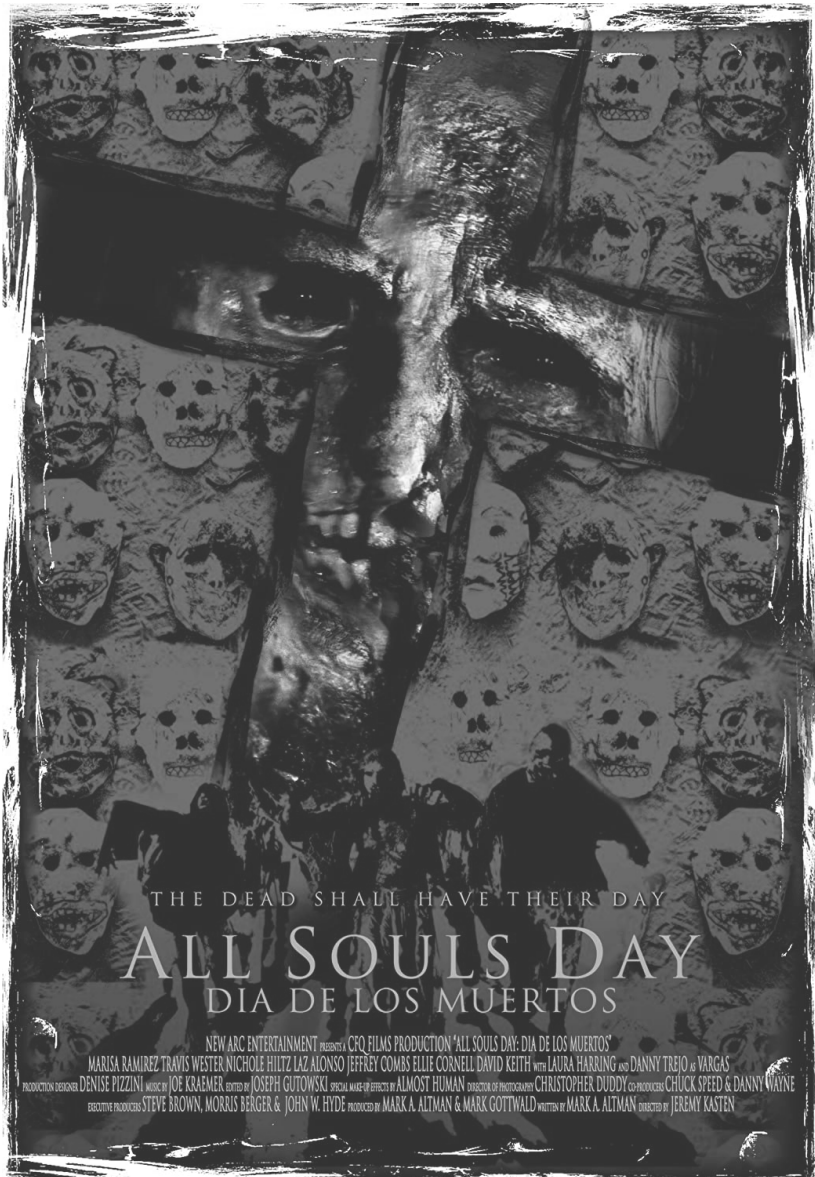
to know.

In fact, inquiring minds want to know for sure that this is indeed set on Samhain. It certainly seems to be, given all Gary's chatter, Karen's focus on that date and, of course, the eventual title of the movie and its various synopses and all the other elements that fundamentally underline that we're on Samhain. However, Paul has an odd reaction when Pandora does all her explaining about what the holiday means, commenting that there would be nothing to worry about, as "Hallowe'en is still far away."

I wonder if the full version of the movie only mentioned Samhain as a means to explain Gary's clairvoyance but it was later bulked up to be the selling point, being, quite frankly, far easier to hang the film on than the fifteen times great-grandkids of Sawney Bean. And, if we make it through the movie and remember anything in it that isn't a dead porn star, it has a firm chance of being that Gaelic holiday that the teacher can't pronounce.

After all, Gary the freaky caretaker is a good salesman. What's it about again, Gary? "Bloody sacrifices. Blessing of the harvest. Feast of the dead." Oh yeah, tell me more!





## ALL SOULS DAY: DIA DE LOS MUERTOS (2005)

*Día de Muertos/Day of the Dead*

Director: Jeremy Kastan

Writer: Mark A. Altman

Stars: Marisa Ramirez, Travis Wester, Nichole Hiltz, Laz Alonso, Mircea Monroe, Jeffrey Combs, Ellie Cornell, Noah Luke, Damien Luvara, David Figlioli, Robert Budaska, Danny Trejo, Laura Harring and David Keith

While it doesn't have a much higher rating on IMDb than *Evil Breed: The Legend of Samhain*—a 3.7 at the time of writing compared to a 3.2—this low budget film looks a lot better from moment one. Joe Kraemer's lively score underpins some exotic spellcasting, while the opening credits suggest that we're not just going to be watching a bunch of new names but a few that we'll recognise too. I spotted Jeffrey Combs, Danny Trejo and David Keith, for a start. And we soon discover that we're south of the border, in Santa Bonita, Mexico in 1892, which adds an exotic feel, even if it's really Santa Clarita, California with some colourful costumes to liven it up.

Clearly the budget isn't particularly large, but the Mexican townsfolk actually look like Mexican townsfolk instead of white or Native American actors in brownface and Christopher Duddy's camera does a pretty decent job of making it look like Raoul is really struggling through a carnival with whatever he's found in the local mine rather than just a handful of extras that happen to be thrown his way. It's some sort of headdress, apparently made of gold.

Unfortunately for him, Danny Trejo is already hiding inside his house. After determining where Raoul hides that headdress, he convinces him to shoot himself in the head, so spilling his blood all over the gold. Trejo is Vargas Diaz and he looks absolutely fantastic in period attire, with none of his tattoos visible. He's gloriously colourful in a waistcoat that's turquoise on the back and red on the front, fringed in gold and accented by a green

tie and tiny blue spectacles.

He has a gift for his townsfolk. “Reap the rewards of our discovery,” he tells them, which is of something important located inside the mine, as that’s where he ushers everyone to “Enjoy the celebration, which I know you will remember for the rest of your lives.” Turning towards the camera in textbook villainous style, he adds under his breath, “every remaining moment of it”. Sure enough, the very next thing we know, there’s a huge explosion and it’s in the entrance to the mine, surely killing every one of the townsfolk immediately or, at least, trapping them inside for a slower, more horrible demise.

Then we jump forward sixty years to October 1952. Jeffrey Combs is driving down through Mexico, waiting until he’s almost out of gas because it’s cheaper the further south you go. That turns out to be at Santa Bonita, which unsurprisingly looks a heck of a lot emptier than we just left it, and they decide to stop for the night. He’s Thomas White, a perfect name that highlights just how white this all-American family of 1952 is: Thomas and his blonde wife Sarah, blonder daughter Lilly and son Ricky, after his polio surgery but still on crutches.

Nobody shows up to help, a detail that may mostly tie to nobody having checked in since 1947, so Thomas does it himself. “For Heaven’s sakes,” he asks, “what is wrong with these people?” None of them even habla inglés



and one of them's busy weeping and cleaning up blood. Even Lilly calls her father out on his overt racism, when he points out that, should they get arrested, they'll just bribe the arresting officer because "that's what they do down here in Mexico." The only one even making an attempt to learn any Spanish is little Ricky.

While Combs and Ellie Cornell, who plays Sarah, have heritage in the horror genre, the latter having played the lead in *Halloween 4* and returned for *Halloween 5*, it's Mircea Monroe, as Lilly, who gets the first death scene. Scared in the bathtub, she's chased outside in a slip to be confronted by what looks like a Día de Muertos parade and is, in more ways than one. It's the dead of the town, who have returned for this one night of the year, wearing masks and eager to consume what we presume they perceive as sacrificial flesh. Ricky is safely inside, grinning through the window with an old woman as the walking corpses increase their number.

Who knows what happens to Thomas and Sarah; last we saw, they were upstairs stripping off to get jiggy with it, but we're about to move right on for a second time, this time a further 53 years so the couple we see driving south this time are an interracial couple, something that just wasn't on the cards half a century earlier. Alicia is Mexican and Joss, her boyfriend, is a gringo, on his way to meet her traditional family.

They have quite the arrival in Santa Bonita, because Joss is distracted



and so has to slam on the brakes to avoid a funeral procession. Not only does the coffin fall to the ground but it spills out a live naked woman too, ritually painted and bleeding from the mouth. She writes in the dirt with a stick to explain why she can't speak: they cut out her tongue so that they wouldn't hear her scream.

The most eagle-eyed among the viewers will have quickly figured out what's going on, of course, not just with regards to this young lady but to why the sheriff is clearly an American: his nametag reads Sheriff Blanco, there's a Texan flag on his office wall and that's Lilly White's photo in the frame on his desk. Technically actor David Keith wasn't even alive in 1952 but he's close enough to the right age to make the connection believable. Just in case that isn't enough, the young lady at the hotel won't check in Joss until Alicia joins him, but then she adds a courtesy bottle of 1892 wine to their stay. And it's 1st November, the season of Dia de los Muertos, the Day of the Dead.

At least that's what Alicia calls it and she's Mexican, but maybe that's a sign that she's really Mexican American because that's the American name for the holiday, in what's called a back-translation. In Mexico, it's Día de Muertos, and it's a surprisingly recent national holiday.

Sure, there are traditions going back two or three thousand years to celebrate ancestors and there's even an Aztec festival that's dedicated to





Mictēcacihuātl, Lady of the Dead, who was sacrificed as an infant and now rules the underworld, Mictlan, with her husband, Mictlantecutli, but these were often in the summer. Only later did they shift to correspond with Allhallowtide, maybe as the northern states of Mexico had rejected pre-Columbian celebrations as being pagan. The result wasn't made a national holiday until the 1960s.

And this holiday isn't one, but three days of celebration to closely tie to Allhallowtide: All Hallows Eve (or Hallowe'en), All Saints Day (or Día de los Inocentes) and All Souls Day (or Día de Muertos). You ought to remember deceased children on 1st November and adults on the 2nd.

There are lots of traditions associated with Día de Muertos and some of them have crossed the border into Arizona. We certainly have sugar skulls and skeletons and really cool facial make up, not all of which is left over from Hallowe'en. However, I haven't yet seen anyone, even Latinx author friends, writing any *calaveras literias*, or short poems written originally to make fun of death but later politicians, celebrities or other famous people, but I'd love to see that trend pick up. Like many holidays associated with the dead in Mexico, many families leave food for the spirits as offerings, such as *pan de muerto* or bread of the dead, and there are drinks traditional to the holiday, like *atole* and *champurrado*, both *masa* drinks made with a maize base. Catholics are always fond of building shrines and that bled



over to the Day of the Dead, with such families adding photos of deceased relatives to their shrines to the Blessed Virgin Mary or building new ones. Of course, candles aren't just commonplace to shrines and so tend to get lit everywhere.

In this movie, there's another tradition, because contemporary Santa Bonita is still dealing with the actions of Vargas Diaz way back in 1892 and I'm sure you've figured out what that tradition is. If not, Sheriff Blanco soon explains it to the tongueless prisoner he's locked up in a cell and, when she commits suicide, thus avoiding her planned fate, the townsfolk will need another Mexican and you only have one guess at who they plan that to be.

Fortunately, when Joss goes to see the sheriff, he sees the corpse, and her tongue in his desk drawer and he realises what's going on. He rescues Alicia from her imminent sacrifice in the church too, shooting the sheriff in the process, but we surely know what no sacrifice means and he's an overconfident gringo who soon discovers just how serious things will get in Santa Bonita. At least Alicia now has Tyler and Erica to help, because with Joss's car undrivable, he called them to come to the rescue and, like good buddies, they did.

This isn't a great movie, but it's likeable on more levels than just lead characters struggling through a zombie apocalypse. For one, it's a very



focused zombie apocalypse to tie into the Day of the Dead and I like that cultural play. I also like the progression of new visitors to Santa Bonita. The fifties family are stereotypically white and casually racist, even if the kids do show some progressive thought, but the contemporary characters are highly diverse. Joss and Alicia are a mixed race couple and so are Tyler and Erica, as a white woman and a black and presumably Jewish man. He speaks at least un poco de español too and he's bright enough to give good answers to dumb questions. For instance, after Joss gets bitten, Erica asks if he'll turn into a zombie. Tyler replies that, if this were a movie, then yeah, but, because it isn't, he has no idea. That's refreshing. Joss, on the other hand, clearly hasn't even watched a single zombie movie. Ever.

While I've technically spoiled a couple of details here, there's never any doubt what happened in Santa Bonita at any point in its history, but it's really cool to see it explained to our protagonists late in the film through the use of dioramas. Almost every time we see the old lady at the hotel, she's working on a diorama but we don't see what it's depicting, beyond looking freaky. Only later, do we realise that she's documented the entire history of the town in dioramas, a neatly appropriate take on the Mexican shadow boxes known as *cajitas de muertos*, usually featuring skeletons and made specifically for the Day of the Dead. I wonder how many traditions were on display in this movie that I glossed over through ignorance. I did



catch the *pan de muerto* being carried out of one scene, while the tourists were given a very different type of bread that contained bones. Certainly when the dead rise, they parade in a form similar to a Day of the Dead procession, complete with masks, adding a level of irony to the spectacle.

At the end of the day, I find it hard not to like this movie, even though it's astoundingly predictable. It's always good to see Jeffrey Combs and Danny Trejo, and their roles are important if not particularly long, David Keith's being not much more substantial. The lead actress, however, is excellent. She's Marisa Ramirez and she's gone on to a decent career on television, if not in the movies, this being her first of only three features. As I publish, she's been on *Blue Bloods* for ten years and she has leading roles in a whole host of shows behind her now. The other actress I liked here was Laura Harring, who overplays Martia at the hotel outrageously but never without serious effect. She was already noted, in film because of her role as the amnesiac in *Mulholland Drive*, and out of it for being the first Latina to win Miss USA, among many other talents and experiences; she's had quite an eventful life. The crew may not have quite matched the cast, but there's a very effective, if relatively simple, shot with Alicia following a giant pool of receding blood.

I'm actually surprised that there aren't more horror movies set on Día de Muertos, as it's one of the most photogenic holidays that the world can



boast, but I tend to see it more in animated children's movies or more mainstream films like *Spectre*, the 2015 James Bond flick which famously began during a huge Día de Muertos festival in Mexico City. Ironically, the production invented that, as Mexico City didn't have such a thing, but the feelings that it generated prompted them to start one for real a year later with an attendance that reached 250,000.

That's an example of the hermeneutical feedback loop or what has been dubbed the pizza effect, when an element of a culture is taken elsewhere and transformed but eventually taken back home. Another example that's appropriate to raise in this book would be Hallowe'en pumpkins, which are a completely American concept adapted from the turnips carved by Celtic people during Beltane but later re-exported in their new form to the UK later on as a key component of Hallowe'en.

I for one adore Día de Muertos and even, as heretical as it might seem, honestly prefer it to Hallowe'en. So, as it grows anew, I hope to see it in more horror movies. Let's hope.





## ATTACK THE BLOCK (2011)

*Guy Fawkes Night*

Director: Joe Cornish

Writer: Joe Cornish

Stars: John Boyega, Jodie Whittaker, Alex Esmail, Franz Drameh, Leon Jones, Simon Howard, Luke Treadaway, Jumayn Hunter, Danielle Vitalis, Paige Meade, Sammy Williams, Michael Ajao and Nick Frost

Many of the films that I've covered in this book are obscure for really good reasons, but this is one I'm hoping you've tracked down already. If not, let me be the one to introduce it to you, because this is a hidden gem that's full of people you know now but probably wouldn't in 2011.

I first saw it in 2011, when it came out, at the late and lamented Royale in Mesa. I picked up a copy to show the family and I'm watching it afresh for this project. It's become an old friend. None of the key players were anybody at the time but, less than a decade later, you would recognise the first female *Doctor Who*, Jodie Whittaker, and the first black stormtrooper in *Star Wars*, John Boyega. Two more films on from this £8m indie picture, writer/director Joe Cornish would be writing *Ant-Man* for Marvel. Steven Price, the debuting composer, would win an Oscar for his work on *Gravity*, though he had quite a career as a music editor before this, working with Howard Shore on *The Lord of the Rings* and *Batman Begins*. The only name fairly recognisable in 2011 was Nick Frost in a supporting role as Ron.

It's in this book because the fireworks that kick things off and partially mask an imminent alien invasion in the process aren't for Independence Day, a holiday we unsurprisingly don't celebrate in the UK; they're for Guy Fawkes Night, a peculiarly British holiday that most know about nowadays from the movie adaptation of Alan Moore's graphic novel, *V for Vendetta*.

I always adored Guy Fawkes Night growing up, with its bonfires and its fireworks and the tray of parkin that Minnie Smithies baked for me every year in my adopted home village because she knew how how much I loved

it. Officially, it remembers something far more serious, though: the events of 5th November, 1605, when Guy Fawkes and his various colleagues in the Gunpowder Plot planned to blow up the Houses of Parliament, murdering not only the entire British government in one fell swoop but also the king, James I, as he officially kicked off a new session during the State Opening of Parliament. Let's say that the political and religious ramifications of the day weren't as obvious in 2011, though I'll get back to that later.

*Attack the Block* is an unavaoidably English film but it managed to land an international release. Watching in a theatre in Arizona, it was clear that it was almost as exotic to the local locals (most Arizonas weren't born here) as a feature set in Singapore or Brazil. They had no idea at all what Guy Fawkes Night was and why it adds an extra level to the story.

"Remember, remember the fifth of November," goes the famous rhyme. Sure, we can forget the rest but that part finds a new meaning here as Moses, a wannabe teenage gangster in a council estate in inner London, saves Wyndham Tower, and perhaps the city, from an alien invasion. He's an unlikely hero, but Cornish, who wanted to counter the then trend of "hoodie horror" movies that framed urban youths as villains, builds all his character gloriously and Boyega, a British Nigerian actor debuting on the big screen, does his job magnificently. It's entirely unsurprising that he would soon become a worldwide star recognised the world over, even if some of the local audience would have benefitted from subtitles while this movie played.

We meet Jodie Whittaker first, as a trainee nurse walking back to her





flat in Wyndham Tower on her own in the dark, while the sky is lit up by fireworks and kids run past her with sparklers. That she's quickly mugged in the street by Moses and his crew of kids isn't remotely surprising and it highlights just how new she is to the area. He's got her phone, her purse and even her ring when what seems to be a meteor crashes down onto the roof of a parked car right next to them. It allows Samantha to get away while the kids focus on the car, but it turns out to be no meteor.

Some weird creature attacks Moses and, after he shanks it good with his flickknife, it rushes off into the night. The gang track it to a playground, where it finds itself cornered, and they slaughter it. You will not be at all surprised, however, when the camera pans up into the night sky to show us that it was hardly alone. There are a heck of a lot more creatures on their way and they're going to keep Moses and his crew very busy indeed.

I should mention here that Wyndham Tower is surprisingly realistic, as the sci-fi action adventure of this movie doesn't stop Cornish throwing in a great deal of social commentary, as well as some neat nods to influences. It's a high rise block of flats sitting in a council estate. The former means that it's a huge ugly fire risk of a building, part of a concept introduced after World War II as a way to replace Victorian slums but which soon fell out of favour because they became just as crime-ridden. The latter means that the homes are provided by the local council as a means to keep some housing affordable for the working class and the needy. In other words, Wyndham Tower isn't somewhere where you live because you want to; you live there because it's the only viable option for your circumstances. It



would be easy to see Moses as a teenage hoodlum, and appropriately given that he's exactly that, but it takes a script like this to look beyond the surface at the reasons why he's a teenage hoodlum and why there aren't exactly a lot of other options for him.

The tower is obviously named for John Wyndham, British author of novels like *The Day of the Triffids* and *The Midwich Cuckoos*, both of them filmed more than once, the latter twice as *Village of the Damned*. All his many science fiction works, released under a variety of pseudonyms built from combinations of his real names (he was born with no less than six of them: John Wyndham Parkes Lucas Beynon Harris), are quintessentially English, packed full of alien invasions and social commentary, making him an obvious influence on this film, even before we note that *The Day of the Triffids*, his most famous work, kicks off with a meteor shower.

Incidentally, that meteor shower, watched on the 1981 BBC mini-series adaptation, was arguably the point at which I discovered, as a highly impressionable ten year old boy, that science fiction was more than what I knew from *Battle of the Planets* and *Star Wars*; it was an actual genre of literature, many great examples of which were sitting patiently on my parents' bookshelves waiting for me to dive into them.

We catch a glimpse of a map early in the movie, which shows us that Wyndham Tower is bounded by four courts: Wells Court, Clarke Court, Moore Court and Huxley Court, presumably named for H. G. Wells, Arthur C. Clarke, Patrick Moore and Aldous Huxley, each a famous British science fiction author except for Moore, an astronomer who presented the BBC's



*The Sky at Night* for an incredible 56 years. I love the idea that the real Sir Patrick might have seen these aliens first, but it's possible that the name also refers to Alan Moore, writer of *V for Vendetta*, surely the most famous work of fiction to tie to Guy Fawkes Night. Ballard Street is clearly a nod to J. G. Ballard, British writer of dystopian futures including *High Rise*, and Herbert Way may be a nod to horror author James Herbert, with James Street working for both. Adams Street will be for Douglas Adams, of *The Hitch-Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy* fame, reminding that this is comedy as well as sci-fi action. That just leaves Clayton Street (and Clayton Estate) and I have no idea there. Jo Clayton wrote a lot of science fiction but she wasn't English, which I'd guess would have been a requirement here.

It might seem unlikely for a low budget sci-fi flick, but the script here is notably clever, well thought out and deserving of mention in the same conversations as Wyndham and Ballard, this combining the alien invasion genre of the former and the block's social structure of the latter, going far deeper in commentary than the realisation that these gang members all know who Simon Cowell is but must take their kill to the the local drug dealer, because he watches the *National Geographic* channel, to get any idea of what it might be.

Moses is an up and comer in the criminal hierarchy of the block, not yet in with that drug dealer but working his way into his social strata. He has the confidence, at least on the outside, and that front is an inspiration to the younger kids already working with him or just hoping to one day, like Mayhem and Probs, who are surely ballsy but ignored as inconsequential.



These tough little kids clearly still answer to their mums and nannas. It's telling that they head out to stop an alien invasion on BMX bikes but take the dog with them too because dad said so.

Everything in England is class, even if it's not supposed to be any more. Usually, that manifests as the rich upper class who rule, the comfortable middle class who run things and the poor working class who contribute manual labour, but it's not quite that simple. Here, I was impressed with how even a council estate tower block features its very own microcosmic version of those classes. A gangster called Hi-Hatz is the upper class here, ruling the roost with violence if not much smarts, and he's also the clear-cut villain of the piece, the aliens being far from translatable into any moral sense of good or bad; in many ways, they serve as the MacGuffins of *Attack the Block*. The middle class as the film begins is Ron, the drug dealer who grows his own crops in a hydroponics lab in the penthouse; he works for Hi-Hatz but knows everybody. The rest of the cast are working class, even Brewis, a posh university student and stoner who would be seen as upper class in any other film. His part is skimpy but hilarious, continually cropping up in exactly the wrong place at exactly the wrong time.

Moses is our real lead because he's the one trying to improve himself. Even though he's just another poor kid living in the block, he has ambition and wants to move upwards, even if circumstances mean that it has to be within the local criminal heirarchy. As we'll find, he's also a born leader with a surprising sense of integrity, especially for his age which I won't spoil but which is revealed here perfectly. He takes on the role of hero of



the hour well, far more believably than most heroes in most alien invasion movies because, while it's a part of his front, it's also a part of him as well.

He takes care of business in a whole bunch of different ways. You know you're tough not because you mugged some girl in the dark with benefit of superior numbers but because you beat up an alien monster that clamped a set of glowing jaws on your leg. And you know you're in charge when the other kids actually pay attention when you tell them to "Go home. Lock your door. Do your homework. Watch *Naruto*. Stay inside tonight, get me."

Sam's a believable hero too; even though she finds herself in the bizarre situation of having to team up with the very same people who mugged her at the beginning of the movie. She and Moses are both full of vulnerability but they both do what needs to be done. It's fair to say that they both have good reasons. She's just passed her nursing exams and her training kicks in. He realises that he's the draw for the aliens because he killed the first one, so feels a responsibility to take them down. All these kids have balls too, whether it's the younger boys who constitute Moses's crew or their sisters and girlfriends.

One of the sparks for this film was Cornish getting mugged. Knowing he wanted to adapt it into science fiction, he interviewed urban youths, the sort who might have mugged him, to find out what they would use if a real alien invasion happened. Their responses surely set up some of the best moments of this movie. The girls beat one monster to death with a lamp stand and an ice skate. Moses is ready with a samurai sword but it sticks in the wall, so Sam has to save him.



Frankly, I love everything about this movie, but the characters are first and foremost.

I find Brewis hilarious, the posh pothead who was based on Cornish himself as a youth. He's easily the most educated character in this movie but everyone else knows that they're responsible for solving their own problems, while he expects others to solve his for him. He's the fish out of water here, an entitled boy of society who lost his allowance after he left skunkweed in his trousers when he washed them. At every single point, his perspective is completely different to that of everyone else.

I adored Pest too, who's wise beyond his years and is given many of the best lines of the picture. He's hilarious as well but he delivers every line with utter seriousness. I need to watch *Strippers vs. Werewolves* entirely for the presence of actor Alex Esmail. Amazingly it isn't Pest who gets a very telling line at the very end of the movie: "Why do you always arrest the wrong people?" It seems like it ought to have been, but I understand why it wasn't.

Behind the screen, I'm impressed every time I watch this with the way that Cornish used his budget so well. We see little of London here, beyond the opening. However, we do see everything we need to see in whatever odd alley, street or corridor we happen to be in. He also uses a lift to great effect, one particular example ably highlighting just how much mayhem happened in there without having to splurge for any effects. The effects sequences that he did choose to spend money on are wisely left for wider establishing shots like looks out at the city from Ron's Weed Room and



one with many aliens climbing up the outside of the block. The superb use of lighting is notable early, from the moment that Moses has Pest throw a banger into the playground fort that they've trapped the first monster inside. And the alien design is cool too. They're big black shadows of fur with blue glow in the dark mouths and no eyes. And they're old school too, really two men in gorilla suits with animatronic jaws and more unearthly aspects added in post-production.

And I love all the little details that collectively build a fantastic picture of how inner city London works (or more often doesn't). For instance, these characters don't have vehicles to drive around in like almost every character in almost every movie. Sure, some are pretty young, but they all walk for the most part while a few have BMX bikes. Dennis even has a pizza delivery moped and, when he rescues Moses from a police van, we realise why there are learner plates on it: he's about to get some lessons for Christmas. Only Brewis has a car, because of course he does, but even then it's his dad's and he gets to worry about how to explain to him why it was wrecked: it was the car that the first alien crash landed onto. Instead of the tired old cliché of mobile phones having no signal in horror movies, we get the more believable problem of the kids only having enough credit left for one text. Perhaps most tellingly, there's a conspiracy theory spun up at one point, when Moses suggests that the monsters may be sent by the government to kill the black population.

It ends, of course, with Moses being arrested, which I don't think counts as a spoiler, but his legend already growing, suggesting to us that, in this



very small microcosm of London, he'll be remembered for a long time, highly appropriately for Guy Fawkes Night.

Fawkes is a name almost everybody in England knows, even though he died in 1606 at only 35, in a grisly fashion that's worthy of a horror movie. Discovered leaving the cellars of the House of Lords, in which 36 barrels of gunpowder were ready to be detonated, he was quickly found guilty of high treason. He was sentenced to be hanged, drawn and quartered after being dragged by a horse from the Tower of London to Westminster. He would be removed from the noose before life was entirely extinguished and placed on a table, where his intestines and sexual organs would be cut out and burned in front of him. He would be decapitated and hacked into four pieces, each to be sent to one of "the four corners of the kingdom" in an effort to dissuade other traitors to the Crown.

Even though he died partway through that process, breaking his neck before ever being drawn, we still remember this grisly procession today, centuries later. On Guy Fawkes Night, or Bonfire Night, the tradition is for local children to create a "guy" out of whatever newspapers or old clothes they can find, with a mask the finishing touch. They process it through the streets to a huge bonfire, where it's put in place at the peak before the whole thing is set alight. Some towns, such as Lewes, make an even bigger deal out of this, with the town's population of 17,000 swollen to 80,000 on occasion for six separate parades and fireworks displays. They dig deeper into a vibrant Protestant vs. Catholic history to burn not only Guy Fawkes but Pope Paul V and sometimes others, like Osama bin Laden in 2001. *The*





*Daily Telegraph* appropriately described it in 2008 as “a head-on collision of Halloween and Mardi Gras” and it’s not difficult to see similarities to both, with the krewes of New Orleans replaced by bonfire societies in Lewes.

Not every connection to *Guy Fawkes Night* is grisly, of course. There are two other ways in which it has had quite the impact on a world far beyond Lewes or London or even the United Kingdom.

For one, the graphic novel *V for Vendetta* used a Guy Fawkes mask as a symbol of rebellion, not as a pro-Catholic, anti-Protestant sentiment but as a more general form of rebellion against a dystopian leadership in a future Britain. In turn, after being popularised through the 2005 feature adaptation, that mask was adopted by the Anonymous movement, quickly becoming a symbol of wider rebellion, seen in marches against a variety of injustices against modern society.

A still more abstract connection is the meaning of the word “guy”. The effigy of Guido Fawkes soon became known as the “guy” and, by the 19th century, “guy” had become any oddly dressed person. Over time, it lost all other connotations to simply define a person, any person of any gender. Next time you hear “you guys”, it’s part of a history going right back to Guy Fawkes and the Gunpowder Plot of 1605.

Now, let’s see a spin-off of this film, starring Probs and Mayhem, for its tenth anniversary in 2021! Spoiler: it didn’t happen.





Be It Ever So Humble, There's No Place To HIDE

# HOME SWEET HOME

SANDY COBE Presents

An IWDC Film "HOME SWEET HOME"

Starring JAKE STEINFELD • SALLEE ELYSE • PETER DE PAULA • COLLETTE TRUGG • Introducing VANESSA SHAW  
Produced by DON EDMUNDS • Directed by NETTIE PEÑA • Screenplay by THOMAS BUSH  
Executive Producer: RICK WHITFIELD • Music by RICHARD TUFO/M.S.R. RECORDS, INC.

An  Release  
© 1999

## HOME SWEET HOME (1981)

*Thanksgiving*

Director: Nettie Peña

Writer: Thomas Bush

Stars: Jake Steinfeld and Vinessa Shaw

Ah, Thanksgiving, that bizarre American holiday in which people are so thankful for everything they have that they feel the need to kill people the very next day in order to get even more of it.

I've never quite understood Thanksgiving, but then I'm not American. I didn't grow up learning about all the little rituals: not just eating turkey but watching Snoopy in the Macy's Day Parade on the TV and listening to all eighteen and a half minutes of Arlo Guthrie's *Alice's Restaurant* on the radio. Being English, I've always found it rather odd that the descendants of immigrants would reserve a day to thank Native Americans for saving the lives of their ancestors but not apologise for everything that followed, especially when it remembers a very specific event that nobody can place in history. I was surprised to discover that it didn't even have a firm date until the early 19th century, varying from state to state until settling on the final Thursday in November where it actually replaced a prior holiday, Evacuation Day, which commemorated the British army leaving Boston in 1776 or New York in 1783, depending on the state.

Nowadays, I live in Phoenix, Arizona and so I celebrate Thanksgiving with my American family on the fourth Thursday in November, to which date Congress moved it as recently as 1941. We stuff ourselves with food, misbehave with the grandkids and come home early because some family members work retail so have to go to work to prepare for the onslaught of Black Friday, the year's busiest shopping day.

As a holiday that didn't even exist on a national level until Abraham Lincoln decreed it so in 1863, it imposed itself quickly on the calendar and almost the entire country celebrates it, regardless of their colour, creed or

faith. Given such blanket adherence, I'm rather shocked that more horror movies, or more movies of any genre, come to think of it, haven't been set on Thanksgiving. There isn't even an unofficial Thanksgiving movie, in the way that *Die Hard* has become an unofficial Christmas movie. If it isn't Christmas until Hans Gruber falls off the Nakatomi Plaza, then what has to happen on screen for it to be truly Thanksgiving? I truly have no idea but it ought to be something better than an inflatable cartoon dog.

The most obvious horror film to fill the Thanksgiving slot on my Horror Movie Calendar is 2009's *ThanksKilling*, with a tagline as neatly memorable as "Gobble, gobble, motherfucker!" but I really like to dig backwards and find more obscure movies for my projects.

Initially, I was looking at *Blood Rage*, which I placed on a pedestal in an early review as the "worst film of the 1980s" after seeing it in the theatre a decade and change ago. Watching afresh at home, I see that it's far from that, even though lead actress Louise Lasser sleepwalks through the film like she'd stepped out of a billboard warning against meth addiction. I'm not sure that she even knew a movie was being made around her; she may have felt she was hallucinating the whole thing. Of course, I now realise that *Blood Rage* isn't the worst movie of the eighties because *Home Sweet Home* is far worse. However, it's also that rare creature: a slasher directed by a woman. It features some interesting people and it was the debut of Vinessa Shaw of *Hocus Pocus* fame, so I just had to switch selections.

Now, *Home Sweet Home* is so obscure that I could only find a copy in full frame, but I doubt it would play any better in widescreen. It has so much confidence in its actors that not one of them is included in the opening credits. Those credits don't mention the lighting crew either, though that may be because they didn't show up for certain scenes; it's credible that no footage was shot for them and voices were added later to pretend that there was. The editor is likely only listed because she's also the director, Nettie Peña, and I wonder what she was trying for as there's something here, buried deep down, that hints at interesting even if it never manages to actually get there. But I'm getting far ahead of myself.

Initially, it's routine. Some crazy dude with big muscles hauls some guy

halfway out of a parked car and strangles him to death. The radio is on and the news conveniently tells us precisely what we need to know. He's Jay Jones and, only the previous night, he escaped from the Hobart State Hospital for the Criminally Insane, where he had spent the last eight years for bludgeoning his parents to death.

He's also a PCP addict, for some reason—perhaps mental institutions had moved on from electro-shock therapy and lobotomies—and he injects himself on the tongue before driving away. He's a surprisingly calm and courteous driver for an escaped lunatic who hasn't seen a road since he was eighteen—he keeps his eyes on that road and he doesn't text—but he does grin broadly and he speeds up to run over old ladies while laughing maniacally.

Jake Steinfeld, who overplays Jay Jones with abandon, is actually a big deal, merely not as an actor, not that you'd ever mistake him for one. He arguably started the celebrity fitness industry when he founded FitTV, a 24/7 fitness television network. He also founded, if you can believe this, Major League Lacrosse, which competes for the Steinfeld Cup. His work in

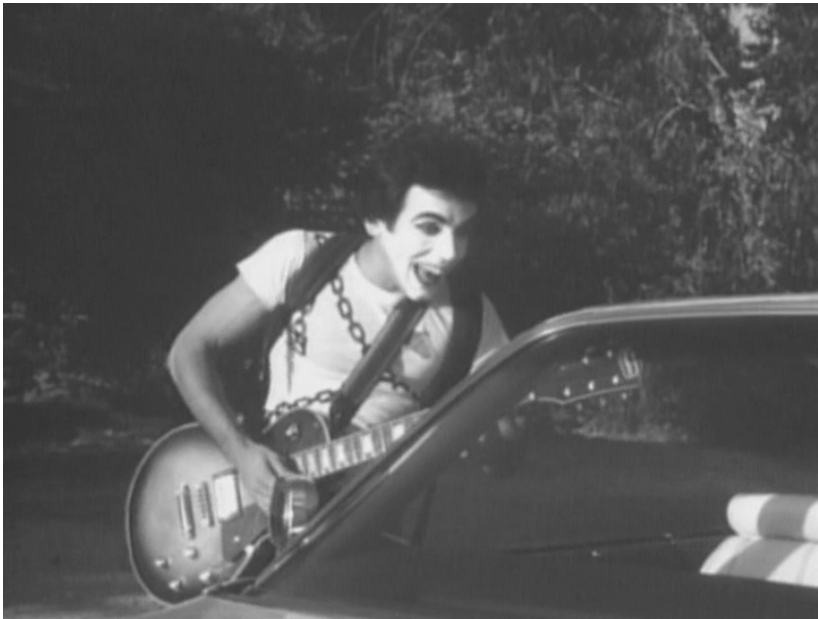


film actually began as a personal trainer for clients like Harrison Ford and somehow it led him into voicing Git the lab rat in *Ratatouille*. He chaired the National Foundation for Governors' Fitness Councils, served a term as honorary mayor of Pacific Palisades and even carried an Olympic torch, in 2012. Most importantly, he hates this movie. You're not alone, Jake!

Every escaped lunatic needs a family to terrorise, of course, and Jones has Harold Bradley's. Why he selects the Bradley residence is pure chance; the ladies need wine so they drive off to get some and Jones, who's pulled off the main road to clean some old lady blood off his car, decides to follow them. Cue the inevitable rest of the film.

That's really as deep as the script, written by Thomas Bush from his original story, gets. Then again, his entire experience prior to this was as a PA on a trio of TV movies, as horrific as *Rudolph and Frosty's Christmas in July* and Rankin & Bass's take on *The Return of the King*. IMDb tells me that he went on to be an assistant sound editor on *Evil Dead II* in 1987 but, as this 1981 movie is dedicated to his memory, I somehow doubt that!

He's certainly not as important to cinema as Don Edmonds, who plays



Harold Bradley, given that *he* had been directing movies since 1972 and producing them since 1973. His most famous title was *Ilsa: She Wolf of the SS*, perhaps the most well known Nazisploitation movie of the seventies, but he was responsible for a string of other exploitation titles too.

Edmonds plays Bradley suprisingly well, but then he was an actor long before he added any other category to his filmography; his debut on TV was in *The Betty Hutton Show* in 1959 and he expanded into film in *Gidget Goes Hawaiian* two years later.

Bradley is supposed to have run a record label in the seventies that recently went out of business, causing him to nearly go off the deep end, and we have no problem buying that because Edmonds feels like the love child of Tony Orlando and Danny Trejo, with his oversized sunglasses, cowboy hat, leather jacket, seventies porn stache and shirt unbuttoned a little too far like he just got home from an over forties disco with Glenn Quagmire. He also seems to be just a little unstable, wanting a beer one minute and a valium the next, all the while raging at or about his son, who he honest to God calls Mistake.

Everyone else follows suit so that's presumably his honest to goodness name, but who would do that to a kid? And what trauma would it inflict upon him? Maybe that's why he's unusual enough for visitors to talk about before they ever reach the house and set eyes on him.

Ironically, Mistake is possibly the only reason why I can't forget *Home Sweet Home*. I know that it sucks and I know that almost every moment in it could have been done better, but Mistake is such a wild anomaly that I simply can't ignore him. How wild, you ask? He may be best described as a new wave mime, right down to the face paint and white shoes, but he has an electric guitar plugged into a portable amp on his back. He apparently likes nothing more than to spy—and I mean *overtly* spy, without even a half-hearted pretense at hiding—on couples making out and, when they notice his presence, he says something inappropriate, plays a lick on his guitar and then hightails it out of there. I'm not sure that I've ever seen a character who feels more like he waltzed in from a completely different movie, felt that he liked the look of the place and thus decided to stay.

Everyone else here is obviously in a slasher movie, but Mistake seems to think that he's in a slapstick comedy. Nobody wants him there and they say so too, in scenes that feel uncomfortably like group therapy sessions.

It isn't just Mistake who contributes to the feeling that Harold's house is a disaster waiting to happen, because the Bradleys have invited an array of other varied characters to their Thanksgiving dinner. Why, we have no idea; Bush's script merely hints in ways that are never consistent. It really feels like Don Edmonds, who produced the film, invited his neighbours along for the shoot and had them ad-lib characters for fun. So let's see if we can figure them all out!

Harold Bradley owns the place, which may be a ranch and may be an apartment block, depending on the moment, and Mistake is his son, but that isn't his mum whose boobs he's ogling. Thank goodness. I thought it was his dad's girlfriend but, as Angel, who's only five, is listed as a Bradley on IMDb, perhaps she's his stepmom. She has to be Linda too, if only by applying a process of elimination to the credits. Gail is the goth who joins her in a search for wine. Jennifer came with Scott. Maria, who definitely needs to stop singing *Besame Mucho*, arrived with Wayne, who's here on business. So she has to be Linda, because that's the only name left!

Now, this is a slasher flick, so we're well aware that these people are only here to be murdered by our friendly neighbourhood psychopath in what will hopefully be interesting ways, but it would have been nice to have a little background first. As it stands, we have precisely no idea how or why any of them even know the Bradleys! It's only the fact that Gail clearly knows Linda and Harold just as clearly knows Wayne that we figure that attendance wasn't randomly selected through lottery.

Hey, maybe Jay Jones won a ticket too! And, at this point, he's more than welcome because, quite frankly, we're eager to see most of these people die horrible deaths, starting with Harold Bradley himself, who goes in memorable style, cut in half by a car bonnet. The lead up to this is truly insane! You see, the electricity goes out and the backup generator doesn't power the TV, so Harold goes for gas. His jeep runs out of fuel *and* breaks down simultaneously, so he siphons off some gas from the killer's station



wagon and goes back to steal the battery. Then... wham!

Bizarrely, the one character we don't want to see die is Mistake, who suddenly becomes sympathetic completely out of the blue. While he has no restraint around adults and honestly seems to enjoy pissing off every last one of them he can find, he's always gentle and tender with his little stepsister, Angel. He clearly cares about her, enough that he'll play guitar for her and perform magic tricks, good ones too as actor Peter DePaula isn't really an actor, though you might actually mistake him for one, with no pun intended.

His role as Mistake is an odd combination of the only other two entries in his filmography: as "Himself—Magician" on a 1975 episode of *The Mike Douglas Show* and "Mime #1" on an episode of *Wonder Woman* in 1978. He's known more for his stage work, including a year stint as the Magician in the musical *The Magic Show* as it toured the country, cast in part because of his background as an actual magician in New York. I still have no idea why he ended up in this film or why he played the role in the way that he did, but Mistake's connection to Angel is the only grounding he has and, to me



at least, it's the best thing about the film.

Revisiting *Home Sweet Home*, it's hard to fathom just how bad this is. I honestly wonder how much of what we see was ever scripted, how much was improvisation and how much was just asides by the actors that were caught on camera and kept. And when I say "actors", I realise that I may well mean "friends of Don Edmonds who showed up for Thanksgiving and decided to make a movie while they waited for food as some Victorian parlour game".

The last third of the film unfolds during Thanksgiving dinner, though not much gets eaten. The only character who really tucks in is little Angel, who then prompts a frantic search when she vanishes, only to be found sprawled out under the table eating turkey. Mistake does serve Maria, spilling cranberry sauce all over her shirt in the process. As she leaves the table, Jennifer exclaims to Scott, "She is so Latin, I don't believe it!" I'm guessing that this line wasn't in the script and Colette Trygg was just commenting on a fellow cast member/Don Edmonds guest that she'd only just met. I hope "Wake up! It's time to go to bed!" wasn't scripted.



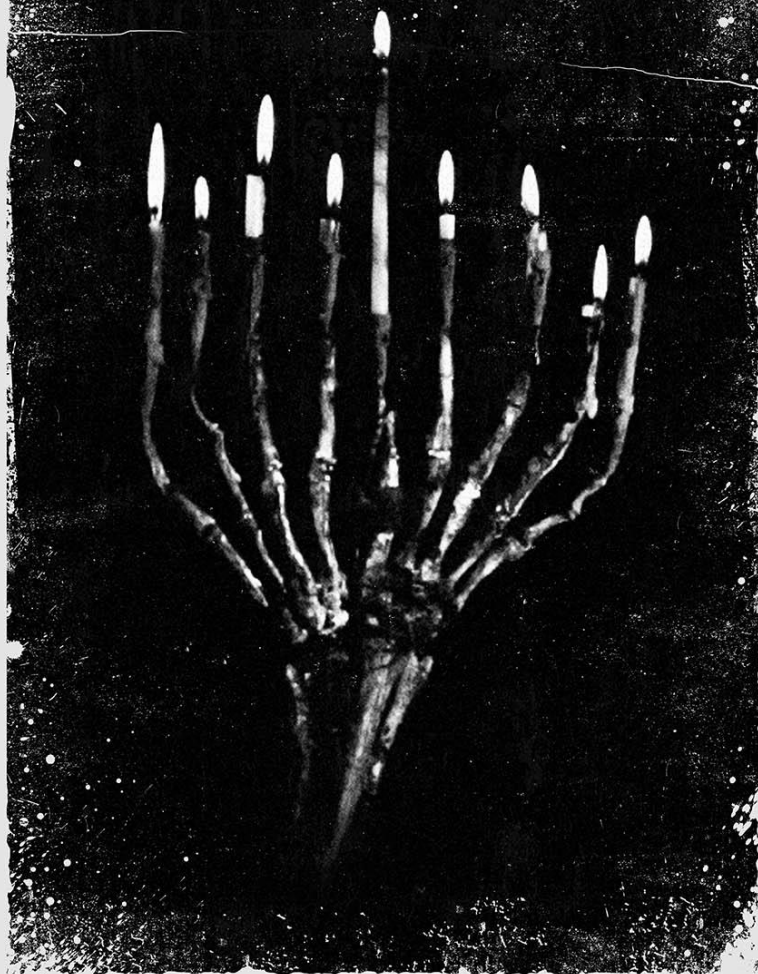
I also wonder if any of these non-actors thought that this would be their big break. I'm pretty sure that none of them, back in 1981, expected five year old Vinessa Shaw, who plays Angel, as the one in their company who would become the biggest name (excepting Jake Steinfield who found his success outside the movies).

It took Vinessa a decade to return to the screen after this, possibly due to the trauma of either making it, seeing it or both. She showed up again at sixteen as Rodney Dangerfield's boss's daughter in *Ladybugs*, with her breakout role as Allison in *Hocus Pocus* following in 1993 and it was uphill from there. She describes Stanley Kubrick, for whom she worked in *Eyes Wide Shut*, as "the first person who encouraged her to continue acting", and it was her role as Domino in that film that prompted Alexandre Aja to cast her as the lead in his remake of *The Hills Have Eyes* in 2006, bringing her back to the horror genre after a quarter of a century.

I wonder if she remembered making this picture so many years earlier and I wonder if she sits under the table to give thanks over turkey every fourth Thursday in November for the opportunity that it sparked.



Dreidel to the Grave



# HANUKKAH

CHARLES FLEISCHER • SID HAIG • CAROLINE WILLIAMS • PJ SOLES • DICK MILLER

## HANUKKAH (2019)

### *Hanukkah*

Director: Eben McGarr

Writer: Eben McGarr

Stars: Charles Fleischer, P. J. Soles, Joe Knetter, Sid Haig, Caroline Williams, Dick Miller and Sid Haig

Apparently, Hanukkah movies are enough of a thing for them to have their own Wikipedia page, even if that page points out that the Jewish holiday of Hanukkah shows up more often on television than in film.

Surprisingly, given that the Jewish people do have their own country, there are more Hanukkah films made in the United States than in Israel. It seems that Hanukkah films are kind of like what Christmas films used to be before they got taken over by Hallmark and stopped being about Jesus and started being about the spirit of the season. Then again, maybe we can blame Charles Dickens for that.

The most obvious difference is that they're Jewish, but they celebrate a religious holiday with a religious story told using religious elements: lighting menorahs, spinning dreidels and eating traditional food. They often reference the Maccabees—Judas Maccabeus and his four brothers—a group of Jewish rebels who took back Judea from the Seleucid Empire in the second century BC, founded the Hasmonean dynasty and rededicated the Second Temple in Jerusalem.

This is a Hanukkah film because it includes many of those component parts but, because it's in this book, it's unsurprisingly a little unlike most other Hanukkah films, even more so than *An American Tail*, *Eight Crazy Nights* or *The Hebrew Hammer*, all of them Hanukkah films but an animated feature, a musical comedy and a blaxploitation flick respectively. This one is a horror movie and it frankly revels in being a horror movie, as full of as gratuitous gore and gratuitous full frontal female nudity as is it menorahs and dreidels.

Surprisingly, though, for a movie that's as ruthlessly exploitative as this one, it even manages to shoehorn in some honest to goodness Rabbinical debate, one character going toe to toe with the killer and arguing against his supposed justification by quoting from the Torah and the Mitzvahs. This Hanukiller may be killing, mutilating and flaying bad Jews because they're bad Jews but he thinks of himself as a Jewish priest and the book of Leviticus strictly prohibits Jewish priests from touching corpses or even being in the same room as one. So he's a bad Jew too!

I should point out that this is a bad movie—a really bad movie—and I'm still struggling to come to terms with how horribly wrong it went, but there's a lot to praise about it, starting with its very origins: sure, it's yet another horror movie that's set on a holiday, but this one happens to be Jewish. Writer/director Eben McGarr is notably immersed in the horror genre, not just by making horror films but by running a fantastic horror convention called Mad Monster Party, at which I've met quite a few of the people involved in *Hanukkah*. However, he noticed the “serious lack of representation” in holiday horror films of anything Jewish—this is a very different movie to *Jeruzalem*—and decided that it was up to him to redress the balance. So he made *Hanukkah* and he also plans to make a couple of sequels, which he aims to shoot back to back, called *Day of Judgement* and *Day of Atonement*, set on or around Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Even



though I had myriad problems with this movie, I hope he's able to make those two because one problem he didn't have was a good reason to do it.

I mentioned the Hanukiller already, so I should point out that there are two of them, not just one.

The first is confined to the prologue in 1983, because he's shot dead by police before he can sacrifice his only son on his kitchen table and before the opening credits. There's absolutely no reason given at this point for why Judah Lazarus is going to kill his kid or why his wife is chained up in the bathroom upstairs, naked in a surely cold bath full of blood, but it's kind of important so I'll hook it from an hour and change into the movie and tell you right off the bat.

He believes that God speaks to him and, while there are 613 mitzvahs, or commandments, in the Jewish faith, Judah has another 53 that God gave him personally. So he murders bad Jews during the eight days and nights of Hanukkah, carving a Scar of David (ha!) into their chests or bellies.

He's also played by the wonderful Sid Haig, who clearly knew that this was going to be his final film and so milks his skimpy screen time as best he can. Judah's death scene is as touching as it is overdone.

Rest in peace, Sid.

Fast forward thirty-six years and the Hanukiller is back, though not in the resurrected form of Judah Lazarus, who many now think of as the lead



character in a TV movie adaptation of the manhunt (“viewer discretion advised”), starring Mark Harmon, Robert Forster and Burgess Meredith. I like that. I’d also watch that!

The new Hanukiller is Obadiah Lazarus, the son that Judah didn’t quite manage to sacrifice, who’s spent the intervening years in foster care, as his mother Ana died after three years in an asylum. Why he takes on his father’s mantle, we don’t know and I can’t even hook the reason from a later point in the movie. This feature simply isn’t interested in telling us the why of anything. It’s a Jewish holiday horror movie and that’s all that it cares about.

Obadiah is a quiet killer who hardly speaks during the entire picture, but Joe Knetter, whose filmography includes such timeless classics as *Strip Club Slasher*, *Night on Has Been Mountain* and *Chainsaw Maidens from Hell*, ably makes him look and feel apart from the world. He exists to enter scenes that he shouldn’t be in and make them his own, capably and bloodily, if not too imaginatively.

So far, so good. It’s been inventive and brutal and touching. Now it’s menacing.

Sadly, it goes steadily downhill from here and that begins when we meet the regular cast. I think Adam is supposed to be the everyman in this picture to whom we’re supposed to relate, at least a little. His roommate





Josh is, in many ways, the final girl, because he's the only good Jew in the film, at least until a cameo appearance at the very end of the film from the magnificent Dick Miller as Rabbi Walter Paisley, making this the sixth time he's played a character of that name.

The original Walter Paisley was his character in the timeless and unique Roger Corman black comedy, *A Bucket of Blood*, but he kept the name alive in *Hollywood Boulevard*, *The Howling*, and a segment of *Twilight Zone: The Movie*, all of which were directed by Joe Dante, then *Chopping Mall* and now *Hanukkah*. He does a fantastic job here, easily providing the best acting in the picture and, as with Sid Haig, it was his final film, but I'm glad he took the opportunity to play his first rabbi.

Rest in peace, Dick.

But back to Adam and Josh, whom we don't care about in the slightest, even though they're just a smidgeon more sympathetic than the rest of the cast. I've read that McGarr wanted the actors who played Adam and Josh, along with the latter's girlfriend, Rachel, and their friends David and Judy, to be "as reprehensible as possible". Apparently, he's a fan of *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* and saw *Hanukkah* as an episode of that show "that has a killer running around". On that basis, the actors did a great job, but I hated all of them—even those played by people I've met and liked, such as Sadie Katz—and not in a good way. I'm used to hating characters in slasher movies and wanting them to die slow and horrible deaths but I'm also used to enjoying watching them get to that point. These characters were so annoying that I didn't even want to watch them, I just wanted to fast forward to their death scenes. These aren't just reprehensible, they're also tedious, even if they have worthy moments here and there.

There's a scene when Rachel cheats on Josh with David that's acutely awkward but in a really good way. He really wanted this and she's clearly into it too, even though she shouts at him that he has a micro-dick and she can't even feel him inside her, all from the reverse cowgirl position so she can't see his utter lack of enthusiasm for that sort of cuckold abuse. It's an awkward scene for him, but it isn't for us because it's funny and sad and karmic all at the same time.

However, it's cross-cut with another awkward scene that doesn't work the same way. This one has Josh eating dinner alone with Rachel's mother, because his girlfriend bailed on him for the lame party that all the others are at. We know that Mrs. Horowitz, his expected mother-in-law, likes him a lot—Adam tells him that he's so Jewish that she forgets he's black—and her conversation very much seems like she's coming on to him. Sure, it's awkward for the characters but it's awkward for us too and that spoils the effect. The biggest problem this movie has is that, far too often, it plays just as awkwardly for us as for the characters who deserve it.

The best aspect the film has is simply that it exists, as a Jewish holiday horror movie, something that's even referenced in the script in clever fashion, as Judy tells Adam, "We need more Jewish horror movies". She even has ideas: *The Last Synagogue on the Left* is cheesy but *Gefilte Flesh* is glorious. That's the best moment in the film that doesn't involve blood.

The next best is a brutally ironic scene that's genius in conception and revolves around the thirty-nine melachot, which are categories of work prohibited to observant Jews on Shabbat, or the Jewish Sabbath. We find ourselves introduced to that at Ian's house after his astoundingly lame party, as all David's tyres are slashed and Josh won't drive on Shabbat to pick up his unfaithful friends. Then we cross-cut to a naked Amanda in a Hanukiller pit. She twigs to it being Shabbat too, so climbs out and escapes

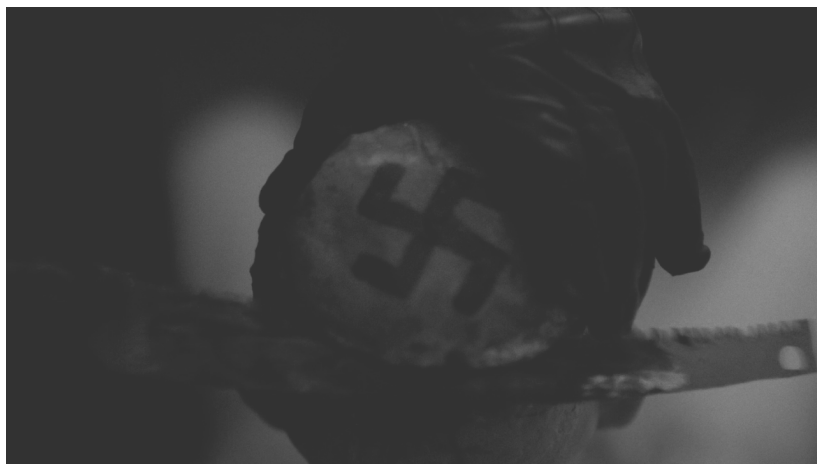


from her handcuffs right in front of him, even chewing off her thumbs in the process. Then she runs out of the house, unhindered, only to promptly step in a bear trap that's chained to the outside wall. And she doesn't even have opposable thumbs any more to do anything about it. That's tough.

I feel duty bound as a critic to highlight that there are some fantastic ideas here as well as fantastic cross-cuts. Amanda's scene of brutal irony is so wrong, in all the right ways, that it'll stay with me and I haven't even described all of it.

There's also an early scene featuring the most stereotypical Jew I've ever seen in film walking down the pavement towards a skinhead, with an SS logo on his jacket and a swastika tattooed onto his scalp, who refuses to give way. Cross-cut to the new Hanukiller carving that tattoo off his dead scalp, as Leviticus prohibits tattoos. He hurls it stickily at the floor and swaps his yarmulke for the remaining skull fragment. How much depth is there in that action! The more you think about it, the more depth shows up to say hi.

There's another glorious moment when some of our supposed "good guys" are searching a house for the Hanukiller and find a bunch of mirrors covered during shiva, or period of mourning. Removing one, they find a living victim, whom an annoying Russian—there are three of them here for some reason and I can't decide if Yuri is more frustratingly annoying



than Ivan or vice versa, though Nina's a little more tolerable than both—immediately punches in the face as a reflex action. There is humour here, but it's all black humour, rooted in Jewish tradition, and, frankly, I only wish there was more of it.

However, I also feel duty bound as a critic to highlight that those fantastic ideas don't remotely make up for the rest of the picture, which is a bizarre failure given everyone involved.

Now, I loved Eben McGarr's debut feature as a writer/director, 2007's *Sick Girl*, a revenge horror with a joyous lead performance from Leslie Andrews, but this feels more like a rough storyboard from him than an eventual product and many of the talented people that he put on screen struggle to make their presence really felt. Even off screen, Felissa Rose is a producer and Kane Hodder coordinated whatever stuntwork I failed to notice, but there are a lot of major people on the screen too.

I wonder if that ties to this being a piecemeal production because it certainly feels like one, with many of the name actors—Sid Haig, P. J. Soles, Caroline Williams, Dick Miller—sharing their screen time with only one other actor each, as if they shot their scenes at completely different times in completely different places.

In fact, almost every scene feels like it ought to have more of at least something: more participants, more extras, more dialogue, more props, more set decoration, more score, more lighting, more explanation, more movement, more continuity, more reason to be in the film to begin with.

In fact, there are lots of scenes, especially at Ian's house, where the characters sit around doing absolutely nothing except gradually figuring out that they probably ought to get around to doing something. When Adam finally says to Nina—Amanda's inexplicably Russian cousin—that they should finally go to the police, we're wondering why he hadn't done that a day earlier and yet they still don't do it. Instead they find Yuri for no reason at all then get back on the couch to do nothing, not even answer questions that clearly require answers. It takes them quite a while to even summon the energy to answer the door when someone knocks.

I get that this had a seriously low budget and it emphatically needed

more money to work, but scenes like these make me wonder if it would have worked even had more money magically materialised on set. It has to be said that, after setting up a wildly gratuitous lesbian make out session between Sadie Katz's Rachel and Louise Rosealma's Judy, gorgeous young ladies with no qualms about full frontal nudity, McGarr somehow backs out of the whole thing, setting up only an admittedly cool later defence of lesbianism by Adam as not prohibited by Jewish scripture.

In fact, the more I think about *Hanukkah*, the more I keep noticing more missed opportunities.

For instance, while this is a very—and very knowing—Jewish film, full of little nods to Jewish rules and customs that feel thoroughly original in a genre that's been plumbing Christianity and paganism for centuries, it doesn't actually bother to explain much to us about the holiday of its title. Nobody cares to mention that it commemorates the Maccabean revolution in Judea or that they reasserted Judaism in the area by rededicating the Second Temple in Jerusalem.

There is mention, at least, that, unlike most holidays covered by horror movies in this book, it isn't one holiday at all but a season of eight days and nights, because we start out with warnings on the radio that six more bodies have been discovered on the eighth night of Hanukkah and there may well be more to come. There's a prominent menorah behind Judah



but nothing to explain why it contains nine candles, the larger shamash candle used to light each of the others, at the rate of one per day. And are jalapeño poppers really a Jewish tradition? Inquiring minds want to know.

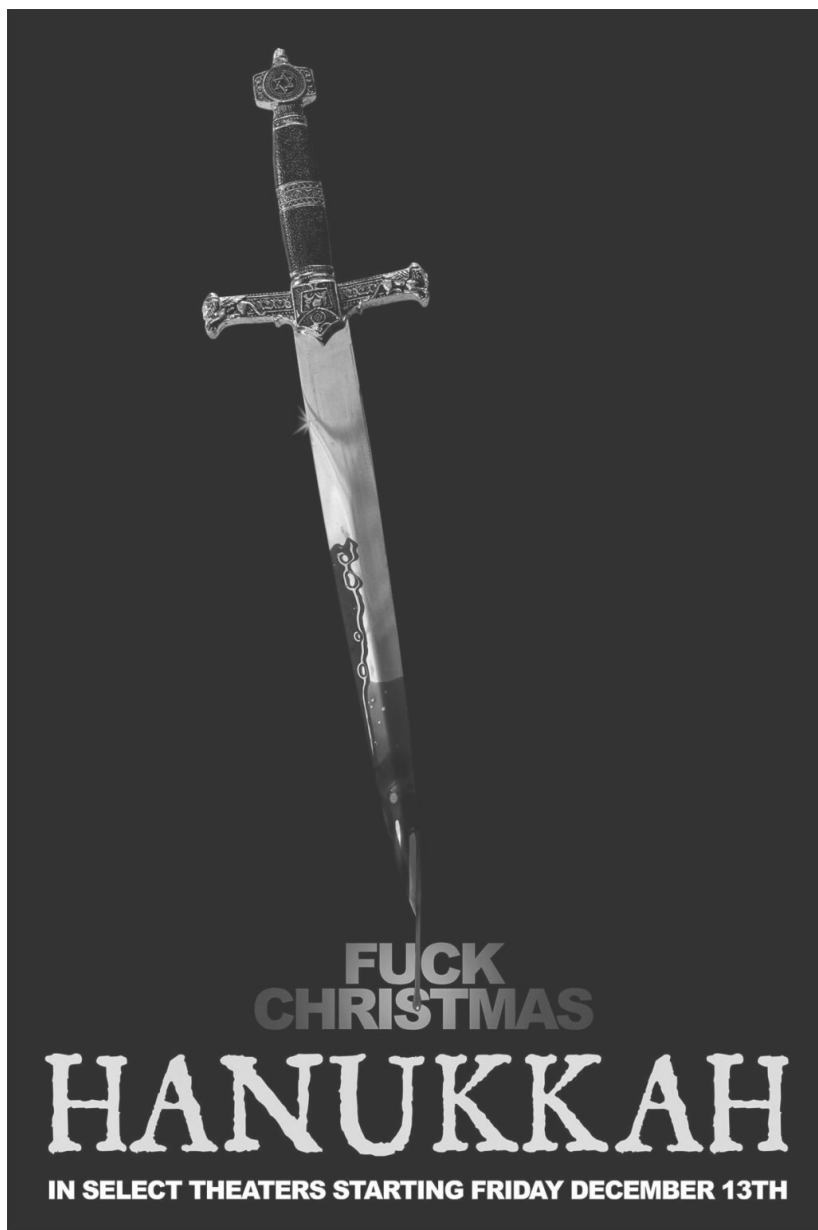
So this is a lost opportunity, but there are two more opportunities yet to come. Eben McGarr certainly has all the off screen talent needed to make a pivotal Jewish horror holiday movie and, through the events that his company Mad Monster hosts, he has access to all the on screen talent he needs too, even if Sid Haig and Dick Miller are sadly no longer with us.

Ironically, Miller plays one of a very limited number of characters in this film who survive it; for all its many flaws, I'm happy to say that the death count is, at least, agreeably high.

The focal point for the two potential sequels appears to be Ze'ev Feist, who shows up at the very end of the movie, during Miller's scene. He's the brother of Amon Feist, a soft-spoken but ineffective rabbi who's played by Charles Fleischer—nominally the lead actor, even though he doesn't show up until over an hour's gone by—and Ze'ev promises to be a much more emphatic character indeed.

All McGarr really needs now is the budget to do *Day of Judgement* and *Day of Atonement* justice and the care and attention to do them right.





THE ONLY THING MORE TERRIFYING THAN BEING ALONE  
IS DISCOVERING THAT YOU'RE NOT.

P2  
PARKING

A NEW LEVEL OF FEAR

SUMMIT ENTERTAINMENT PRESENTS AN A.J.A. / LEVASSEUR PRODUCTION "P2" WES BENTLEY RACHEL NICHOLS COSTAR MARK BENNETT COSTAR BUCK DAMON COSTAR TOMMAMANDY COSTAR RUTH SECORD  
EDITED BY PATRICK MCMANON, A.C.E. PRODUCTION DESIGNER OLEG SAVITSKI DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY MAXIME ALEXANDRE A.I.C. EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS BOB HAYWARD DAVID GARRETT ALIX TAYLOR PRODUCED BY ALEXANDRE A.J.A. GREGORY LEVASSEUR  
SCREENPLAY BY PATRICK WACHSBERGER ERIC FEIG COSTAR ALEXANDRE A.J.A. GREGORY LEVASSEUR DIRECTED BY FRANCK KHALFOUN COSTAR ALEXANDRE A.J.A. GREGORY LEVASSEUR COSTAR FRANCK KHALFOUN

**R** RESTRICTED  
PARENTS STRONGLY CAUTIONED  
SOME MATERIAL MAY BE OFFENSIVE TO SOME CHILDREN

**NOVEMBER**

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PG PARENTS STRONGLY CAUTIONED  
SOME MATERIAL MAY BE OFFENSIVE TO CHILDREN

SUMMIT



## **P2 (2007)**

*Christmas Eve*

Director: Franck Khalfoun

Writers: Alexandra Aja, Grégory Levasseur and Franck Khalfoun

Stars: Wes Bentley and Rachel Nichols

Sometimes the simplest stories are the best and *P2* really doesn't have a heck of a lot more plot than your average elevator pitch. IMDb suggests that, "A businesswoman is pursued by a psychopath after being locked in a parking garage on Christmas Eve" and, frankly, that's about it, but it kept me paying attention for an hour and a half and, crucially, it didn't piss me off. That's always a plus.

It had plenty of opportunity for stupidity and cliché, but it successfully avoided the former and mostly avoided the latter. There's a obvious and cheap ending, but it didn't go with it, partly because it had no interest in setting up *P3* for a 2008 release. It set up its story, told it with some style, wrapped it all up and went on home to spend Christmas with its family, just like our businesswoman wants to do from moment one.

Even though it spends almost its entire running time in a single parking garage—hence *P2* and why there's no *P1*, something that apparently didn't confuse test audiences, unlike *The Madness of King George III*—it has as much claim, if not more, than *Die Hard* to be a Christmas movie. How's that for a controversial statement to start this review? Friendships have certainly been lost over less! It's not Christmas until I've seen Hans Gruber fall off the Nakatomi Plaza... in the *Die Hard* music video by Guyz Nite.

The businesswoman in that synopsis is Angela Bridges, who works in an office in downtown Manhattan, where she's stuck late into Christmas Eve, and the season is completely obvious. The first thing we hear is *Santa Baby* played over the PA system down in the parking levels. Upstairs, Carl the security guard tells Angela that the building will be closed for the next three days. We hear subdued carols floating around the big Christmas tree

in the empty lobby and Angela has a bunch of presents with her to give to her sister's kids when she can finally escape from the office. If some future version cuts the late scene when she explains to police on the phone that she's being held captive in the Arcadia Building on Park Avenue, we might believe that she's at the Nakatomi Plaza where it will surely be Christmas forever.

By the way, that isn't a spoiler. While *Santa Baby* decorates the opening credits, we follow a roaming camera through that almost emptied parking level to a BMW just in time for a distraught young lady to burst out of its boot. Oh, we know where we're going!

What we don't know is how we'll get there and, one obvious red herring excepted, there's little to let us in on that secret until we get to the point where we don't have to guess any more. We don't even know why she's working so late, though we do know that it means that she isn't likely to make it over to her sister Lorraine's in New Jersey any time soon, even though she has the Santa suit.

Given that she's played by the delightful Rachel Nichols, coming off seasons of *The Inside* and *Alias*, I really can't say I wasn't looking forward to that image. I've seen her grow on television since this feature, with stints on *Criminal Minds* and *The Librarians* (somehow I missed out on *Continuum* and *Chicago Fire*), but I haven't seen most of her movies. I've tried to forget *Star Trek* and I avoided *Dumb and Dumberer: When Harry Met Lloyd*. I think I've only seen her on the big screen in the *Conan the Barbarian* reboot, an oddly forgettable film given that she was up there at the very top of the



bill with Jason Momoa, Stephen Lang and Ron Perlman, all favourites too.

I ought to remedy that state of affairs, because she's very good indeed here. She's believable as a driven businesswoman willing to sacrifice her personal life for the sake of her career—even though Lorraine hates it—she's believable as an object of obsession and she's believable as a tough young lady who fights back even though she isn't trained to do so. When she's forced to ring family to say she won't make it for Christmas at all, her mother isn't remotely surprised. When she raises her boyfriend to her kidnapper as a potential saviour, it's obviously an empty threat because she doesn't have any time for one; the only relationship we're aware of is an inappropriate drunken overture a colleague makes to her in a lift that doesn't get him anywhere and for which he later apologises.

Clued-in horror fans will hazard a guess that she'll survive this movie because virgins make good final girls—maybe Angela's name is deliberate—but this is far from a slasher, we're not in the woods (though Nichols was in *The Woods* a year earlier) and I don't see any other girls around. So, if we're going to get a final girl in *P2*, it's going to be Angela for no better reason than she's the *only* girl.

Because this is a horror thriller, the question we have to ask is *whether* she will survive it. Our first hint that she might not comes after she loads presents into the boot and discovers that her reliable BMW won't start. She's a practical girl, so she just retrieves them and heads for the elevator to call a cab, but the universe seems to be dead set on her staying. The elevator won't open. The parking attendant tries to jump start her car but



it won't play along with her. And, while he's handsome—Wes Bentley was the neighbour in *American Beauty* and is sexy enough to be in the cast of *The Hunger Games*—he's also notably awkward. He actually suggests that she join him for his Christmas dinner in the Security office and that's a fantastic mixture of a polite and well-meaning offer in a tough situation, an artless and utterly botched come on and a hesitant kick off to a stalker movie. It's a good scene, but we can surely extrapolate the entire rest of the movie from it.

We aren't surprised when his assistance in getting her cab doesn't work out because the front doors are locked. And, when she fails at the parking garage exit, all the lights go out. This is a very believable opening and, while it's obvious where we're going, it's done well and without clichés. Without any lights, Angela has to use her posh flip phone—hey, it is 2007, remember, and nothing dates movies within the recent past better than personal technology—to light her way through the parking garage and we just know that's going to eat the battery and provide opportunities for jump scares.

Even here, though, it's done with style. She trips over something and, as she stands back up, there's the parking attendant right behind her with a chloroformed rag and Lorraine's just isn't going to happen. She'll wake up in a slinky white dress, seated at a table in the Security office, with roses, wine glasses and romantic decorations in front of her, and Thomas, for that's his name, dressed in her Santa suit wishing her a Merry Christmas. Oh, and she's chained to a pipe.



I'm not going to detail anything further than this scene, because this is where everything really begins, with Thomas polite and apologetic but in no way understanding of just how freaky a situation he's just set up. Even when Angela gets upset with him, he remains cocooned inside a fantasy world where the two of them are involved in a romantic relationship. He actually references *The Sun Always Rises* to her, as he's one of those men who forgives everything his woman does, even her infidelities. "It's what love's supposed to be, right?"

Yes, he does see her as "his woman". Yes, he's completely delusional. Yes, we have a whole movie to watch her try to figure out how to get out—of his clutches, of this office and of the entire building. What makes this film work surprisingly well is that Angela isn't stupid. You can conjure up in your head a checklist of all the mistakes she's going to make and you'd usually be spot on, but Angela isn't your typical victim and she doesn't do any of that stupid crap. My growing realisation of that fact is when I really started to appreciate *P2*.

There are other people in this film, but 95% of it is carried by Rachel Nichols and Wes Bentley, and emphatically in that order, even though the billing doesn't echo it. It's her film and he's her nemesis, even if he thinks that he's her romantic lead. The few other members of the cast are props, sometimes literally, there for the two leads to interact with and react to. One in particular is given a particularly hard time of it, Thomas seeing him as a threat and dealing with him far more brutally than we ever expected.

The gore is superbly handled but it's really not the point. We're digging



deeply into Thomas's delusions to understand who he is and what makes him tick and we're pointing out to Angela just how frickin' dangerous this dude is and how important it is for her to get the heck out of Dodge. He's not someone she can sweet talk out of whatever he has planned. Frankly, the busiest supporting character is Rocky, Thomas's Rottweiler, and you can imagine how many lines he gets. He's a prop too but an important one who leads to some great dialogue.

My problem with *Die Hard* being categorised as a Christmas movie is that it's hard to conjure the season into being the point. Sure, it's set at Christmas and there's Christmas music and a posh Christmas party but it's never really about Christmas, all the way down to John McClane's personal motivations. He's flown to LA to reconcile with his estranged wife and he really doesn't give a monkey's what day it happens to be. Here, Thomas, who is clearly not new in his job, has deliberately chosen Christmas as the time to let a young lady, whom he's admired from afar for however long, in on the secret that he's madly in love with her.

Because he's presumably not a devout Christian who sees Christmas Eve as being a great opportunity to prepare for imminent anniversary of the birth of Jesus Christ, his Lord and personal saviour, he translates the day into modern secular terms. He sees Christmas as a time of togetherness for people who love each other; he's madly in love with Angela and he just knows that she will fall madly in love with him too when she sees what he has got her as a Christmas present, because how could she not?

I won't tell you what that is, but it's very special and it leads directly to



that brutal scene I mentioned a couple of paragraphs ago. It's a present of serious power and import. It dedicates Thomas to Angela irrevocably and, naturally, he thinks it's romantic as all get out.

That it isn't romantic in the slightest is why we have a feature film. The "madly in love" is accurate, because Thomas is batshit crazy and there are scenes here that demonstrate that with style. My favourite is an exercise in contrast that ably highlights his disconnection from reality. Angela's somewhere out there in P2 and she's armed herself with a fire axe, taken out all the security cameras so he can't tell where she is and then comes looking for him. Thomas, on the other hand, is safely in his Security office, dancing with a teddy bear that she'd bought for one of her sister's kids and serenading her over the PA system by singing along to an Elvis record.

Sure, he's unrealistically confident in his control of the situation he's contrived but that's because he's delusional. What's important here is that he also has no conception whatsoever that his destiny might be planning to kill him in order to escape his affections. All the best writers see their stories from the perspective of all their characters. These writers are well aware that this is a light hearted romantic comedy to Thomas, even if it's a horror/thriller to Angela.

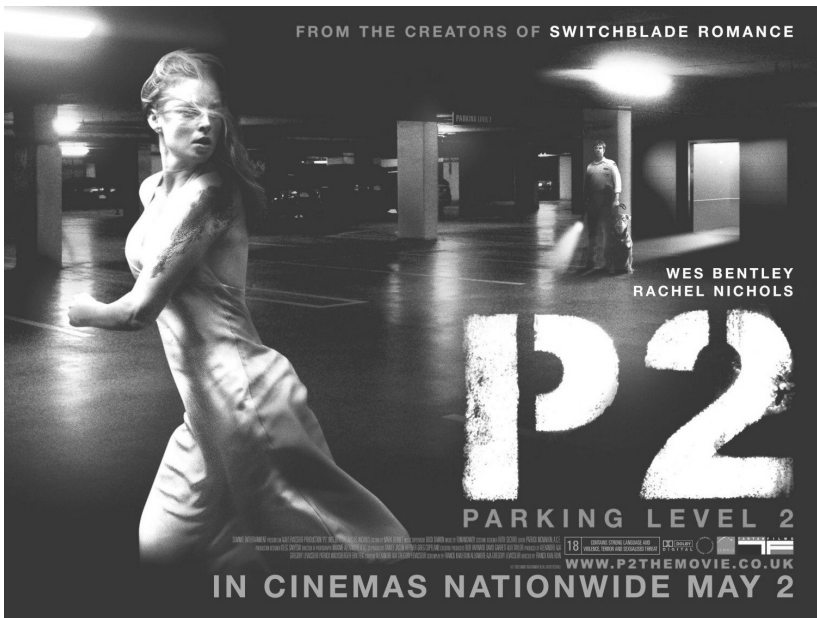
Those writers, by the way, are Alexandra Aja, Grégory Levasseur and the film's director, Franck Khalfoun. A year earlier, the former two wrote the remake of Wes Craven's *The Hills Have Eyes*, which Aja also directed. More importantly, three years before that, they co-wrote a pivotal French movie called *Haute Tension*, or *High Tension*, whose success at the Toronto



International Film Festival, where it screened in its legendary Midnight Madness track, was arguably the beginning of a string of international successes for extreme French horror, a scene later labelled by critic James Quandt as New French Extremity.

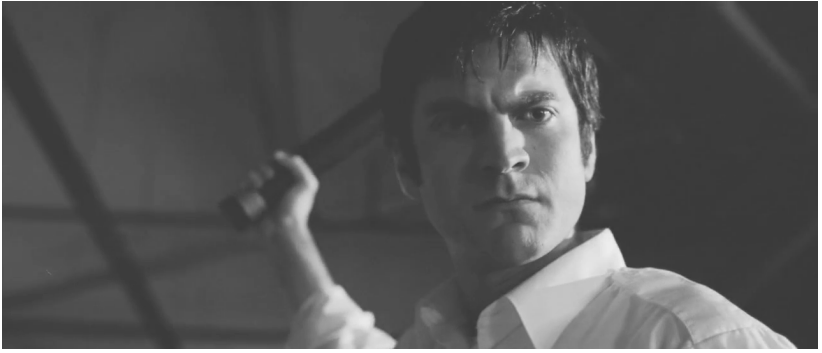
This film isn't remotely as extreme as that one but it does follow on in some ways. *Haute Tension* is a love story too, of sorts, and Mark Holcomb suggested Steven Spielberg's *Duel* as an obvious influence in his review for *The Village Voice*. It's even more of an obvious influence here, because this entire script is a deadly dance between two characters, one of whom is presumably sane but the other is certainly not. This is *Duel* reworked as a mad love story.

And it's my first Christmas present to y'all. Merry Christmas, folks! I'll have another one for you tomorrow.





*A Horror Movie Calendar*



**THIS CHRISTMAS  
YOU BETTER BELIEVE IN SANTA... OR HE'LL SLAY YOU.**



# Christmas Evil

... the night he dropped in.

WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY LEWIS JACKSON  
A CINEVID PRESENTATION OF AN EDWARD R. PRESSMAN PRODUCTION  
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## **CHRISTMAS EVIL (1980)**

*Christmas Day*

Director: Lewis Jackson

Writer: Lewis Jackson

Stars: Brandon Maggart, Jeffrey DeMunn and Dianne Hull

There are so many Christmas horror movies out there—and others that may not technically be horror but would be just as traumatising to young, impressionable kids slipping in VHS tapes labelled only “Christmas”, from *Santa and the Ice Cream Bunny* through *Nixon and Hogan Smoke Christmas* to *Tranny Claus*—that I may well write a book on just them, but I still needed to pick one for *A Horror Movie Calendar*.

I decided on this one over the 1974 *Black Christmas*, which is too easy a choice even if it’s still not as well known as it should be, because no less an arbiter of taste than John Waters has lovingly described it as “the greatest Christmas movie ever made”. And, you know what, he’s right! As flawed as it is, it’s actually a surprisingly inventive look at Christmas and what the holiday means, all wrapped up in slasher clothing with a red bow on top.

One thing I like about it most is that it seems to unfold in a world where no days exist that aren’t holidays, which is social commentary in itself. We watch Harry Stadling climb out of bed in his Santa pyjamas, practice his Santa laugh and check his Santa belly as he hums a carol or three, in an apartment decorated like a greeting card. He works at a toy factory and Frank has him cover his late shift so he can take his wife out of town for the holidays. It’s so obviously Christmas that we’re shocked to realise that it’s actually Thanksgiving.

Harry rings his brother Phil to tell him that he won’t make it over for Thanksgiving dinner. He doesn’t tell him that he’s busy watching Santa in the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade, the announcer pointing out that it’s his first appearance of the season. He probably doesn’t need to.

However, this moment prompts Harry to shift into overdrive with his

preparations for Christmas and a quick montage highlights that he's not alone. All the stores promptly put out their Christmas displays, Christmas trees go up in public squares and, no doubt, on whatever analogue 1980 equivalent of Facebook we had, people would have moaned about how this is all happening so early. Good grief, we haven't even got to Hallowe'en yet and *they* are suddenly shoving Christmas down our throats!

In Harry's world, Thanksgiving and Hallowe'en don't exist, because the Christmas season lasts for all twelve months of the year. To Harry, the day after his Christmas-themed Thanksgiving is his work's Christmas party and the day after that is Christmas Eve. And, we know from the prologue, which took place on Christmas Eve in 1947 when Harry was a child, that lack of acknowledgement of an actual calendar of other days, weeks and months is a gigantic #C54245 Christmas Red flag.

For the first few minutes of this movie, everything is Hallmark card perfect. Harry's sitting on the stairs with Phil and their mother, as all the magic unfolds. The narrator reads *A Visit from St. Nicholas* ("Twas the night before Christmas and all through the house...") as Santa actually drops down the chimney into Harry's living room. He's in his traditional red suit with his traditional white beard. A big sack of presents follows him to put in the stockings hanging by the fireplace. He enjoys the milk and cookies left for him by the well decorated tree and, when Phil giggles, Santa even winks at him before disappearing back up the chimney.

Later, as the kids settle down to sleep, Phil states that Santa was Daddy all along and Harry doesn't believe a word of it, so he sneaks downstairs. There's Santa, still in costume, having himself a grand old time feeling up mum's thighs, her robe wide open and her intentions clear. Harry runs up to the attic, traumatised, smashes a snowglobe and cuts himself with the broken glass. It's not so Hallmark card perfect now, is it?

It doesn't take a qualified psychiatrist to realise, as the picture moves along, that Harry has conflated sex with violence in his mind and is now half convinced that he's actually going to be the next Santa Claus, one who truly lives up to the spirit of Christmas, unlike the lecherous Santa who molested his mother back in 1947.

His apartment is just a beginning. He even spies on the neighbour kids with binoculars so that he can see who's being naughty and who's being nice. Little Scotty Goodrich takes out the trash, so he's good. Adorable Susy Lovett plays with her doll, so she's good too. But Moss Garcia reads *Penthouse*, then cuts out and dismembers the centrefold, so he's been bad. And Harry keeps detailed records in annual volumes. Moss's page is really not promising.

Yeah, Harry has some deep seated problems, but he's highly functional. In fact, he's even been given a promotion at Jolly Dream ("If it's not a Jolly Dream," says the sign in his office, "it's not worth having"), so he's now working a desk instead of the actual assembly line.

The heart of the film is in the idea that real life isn't a particularly good place for someone who thinks that he's Santa. Harry doesn't see his job at Jolly Dream as a job so much as it's a calling and he's grounded enough to realise that he's probably alone in that. He certainly fails to get over to his colleagues just how important hand made toys are to kids.

He isn't happy at all when his boss introduces him to a new idea man, George Grosch, who's come up with a vague plan to donate toys to a local hospital for mentally handicapped kids. Sure, he appreciates the general sentiment but George has no idea how many kids are there and doesn't care whether everyone will receive a gift or not. What's more, he wants



the employees to chip in towards the cost to help “shoulder the burden”. So he takes it upon himself to fill up more sacks with factory toys for him to distribute. The key scene may be the one when Harry glues on his Santa beard so perfectly that, when he cries into the mirror, “It’s me!”, we can buy into him thinking he’s New Santa. It’s what’s known as a fugue state.

Maybe it’s the one soon afterwards, as he practices his traditional “Merry Christmas!” outside the Willowy Springs Hospital and it starts to snow to confirm that he’s got it right. His delivery becomes a real success, the staff overwhelmed. When they ask who donated so many presents, he replies confidently, “Some people who didn’t realise how generous they could be.” Hey, he’s not lying!

Less successful is the next stop, which is where Harry’s boss has gone for a midnight mass. The first few worshippers down the stairs pick on him, so he stabs one in the eye with a toy soldier and then bludgeons a few more to death for good measure.

And so we go. Wherever people have been good, the experience that he brings them is a good one. He’s a big hit when he’s dragged into a Families and Friends Organization party. But wherever they haven’t been good, it’s not so great. After the shift he worked for Frank, he discovered that Frank spent his time in a bar, laughing about that schmuck Harry because he wasn’t going anywhere till the morning. And so Harry slices Frank’s throat



open in his bed with a star ornament for the top of a Christmas tree, after leaving toys under Frank's tree for his kids.

Everything is played straight, so even the most outrageous moments are surprisingly effective. For instance, on the way to Frank's house, he urges a non-existent set of reindeer onward, because that's what Santa would do, and, once there, he clammers onto the roof to climb down the chimney, because that's also what Santa would do. However, he fails, of course, because he's way too big, so has to pry himself back out and find a new way in. Perhaps best of all is the scene where a Geraldo Rivera ripoff tells television viewers on Christmas morning to avoid anyone dressed like Santa Claus. That leads, perhaps inevitably, to an actual police line up of mall Santas, which is priceless too. Even some of the cops half-seriously see the bright side, because they realise that this killer Santa is at least following the rules. Det. Gleason thinks that making kids scared of Santa again might be a good thing, so that they'll be good throughout the year.

And, throughout all of this, Brandon Maggart totally and utterly sells the gradual deterioration of Harry's mind. He has to be the single most sympathetic slasher I can name.

I'd never heard of Maggart before seeing this, but he's a well-regarded actor on stage, television and film, as well as being a painter and author, even if he's better known nowadays for being Fiona Apple's father. His previous feature, made the same year as this, was *Dressed to Kill* for Brian De Palma, and his next would be *The World According to Garp*. He appeared on the pilot episode of *Sesame Street* in 1969, continuing throughout the first season as Buddy in the dimwitted pair of clowns called Buddy and Jim. A year later, he was nominated for a Tony for his originating role in the Broadway musical *Applause*, based on *All About Eve*. Everything I read about him adds to the suggestion that he's massively versatile, but his website oddly highlights how he might have been made for this role. Not only does he now have the white beard he needs to play Santa, his stated motto is "When reality becomes too stressful, I create my own. I fly. And, from space, things don't look all that bad." Given the fantastic ending to this film, that's wildly appropriate.

I think it's fair for me to spoil that ending, because it's crucial to our understanding who Harry is and why he's important on a far wider stage than this one movie. Chased by literal villagers with torches, though they don't have pitchforks, his van launches off the side of a bridge but, rather than spill into the river, as logic suggests, it actually continues on into the sky, even turning towards the moon. The narrator returns to wrap up *A Visit from St. Nicholas*: "I heard him exclaim as he drove out of sight, 'Merry Christmas to all and to all a good night.'"

It's a fantastic ending, literally and figuratively, and it's one that goes against everything we've seen thus far. It could tell us, as I'm sure it does intend to, that Harry's own persona, in this trauma-fuelled fugue state, has finally been utterly subsumed by that of Santa Claus and he's going to die thinking that he's the new Santa. However, it also hints that he's a sort of Christmas equivalent to Sam in *Trick 'r Treat*, not a human being with human problems, but the literal guardian of the rules of the season, albeit the season of Christmas rather than Hallowe'en, who gets to enforce them just as bloodily. I like that.

The film's title is clever but a little unfortunate, because it's a great pun but one that's focused on just one day, Christmas Eve. While that crucial night before Christmas is especially important to Harry, the first death scene happens after midnight mass, so we've already moved into the next day by that point and thus everything important that follows, all the good and all the bad, occurs on Christmas Day. The working title was simply *Santa*, which isn't remotely as good; my copy is titled *You Better Watch Out*; and other prints bear the name *Terror in Toyland*, which sounds more like the famous Laurel & Hardy take on Christmas that we see at a late point here, *March of the Wooden Soldiers*, which is the abridged version of *Babes of Toyland*. None of them match *Christmas Evil*, so I guess we'll all have to live with it suggesting a day before the holiday rather than the holiday itself. Of course, most traditions include Christmas Eve in their details, because, like so many other holidays, they used to run from sunset to sunset rather than midnight to midnight.

As an Englishman living in Arizona, Christmas is the holiday when I feel



the most disconnected, as I used to celebrate it in one country, following certain rules and traditions, including some specific to my own family, but I now celebrate it in another, following an entirely different set of rules and traditions.

To me, Christmas is about putting up a tree on Christmas Eve, ahead of midnight mass at our local church, followed by small stocking presents to keep us kids happy and asleep. The next morning and the early afternoon would be spent cooking a huge dinner; we'd eat turkey and pork, roast potatoes and three kinds of stuffing, finishing up with a very alcoholic Christmas pudding, using my grandma's recipe that included brandy and Guinness, served with rum sauce. As the adults sat back in exhaustion, we kids would hand out everyone's presents from under the tree. We'd watch the Queen's Speech, the final of *The World's Strongest Man* and, if we stayed awake long enough, the big evening movie on television. I remember the year when we watched *Raiders of the Lost Ark* as it snowed outside. Magical.

In Arizona, perhaps the only commonality for me is roast turkey for dinner, though I do contribute a Christmas pudding that only I eat, given that all Christmas food in America apparently must include marshmallows and isn't allowed to include dried fruit. The Christmas tree is put up long before Christmas and it's taken down much sooner than 6th January, so entirely ignoring the Twelve Days of Christmas, which run from Christmas



Day to Epiphany. What else goes up are lights, plastic icicles and gigantic inflatables to fill up yards and sway on rooftops, so prompting traditions of driving the kids around town after dark to see the biggest light shows. Americans watch sports on Christmas or they leave the Yule Log on TV in the background, a four hour vista of a roaring fireplace, following *It's a Wonderful Life* the day before. Many of them have traditional gift wrapping movies—my better half's is *Bram Stoker's Dracula*, albeit not for Christmas reasons, while friends always watch *Army of Darkness*. Another family tradition here is to buy the kids one new ornament each year to add to the growing collection on the tree.

What I realise watching *Christmas Evil* yet again is that most of these are either modern or very focused traditions and there are a host of older traditions that have fallen into that timeless hole of nostalgia. Harry is entirely secular, so he isn't interested in Christmas being a contraction of "Christ's mass" as a celebration of the birth of Jesus; he only shows up outside midnight mass here because he knows his boss will be there. He doesn't have an Advent calendar, he doesn't go out carolling and there isn't a nativity scene in his apartment. Similarly, he doesn't look back to when 25th December was adopted as Christmas Day, with the first known celebration being three centuries after the death of Jesus. He doesn't put up mistletoe, one of the most overt pagan symbols that remind us of the

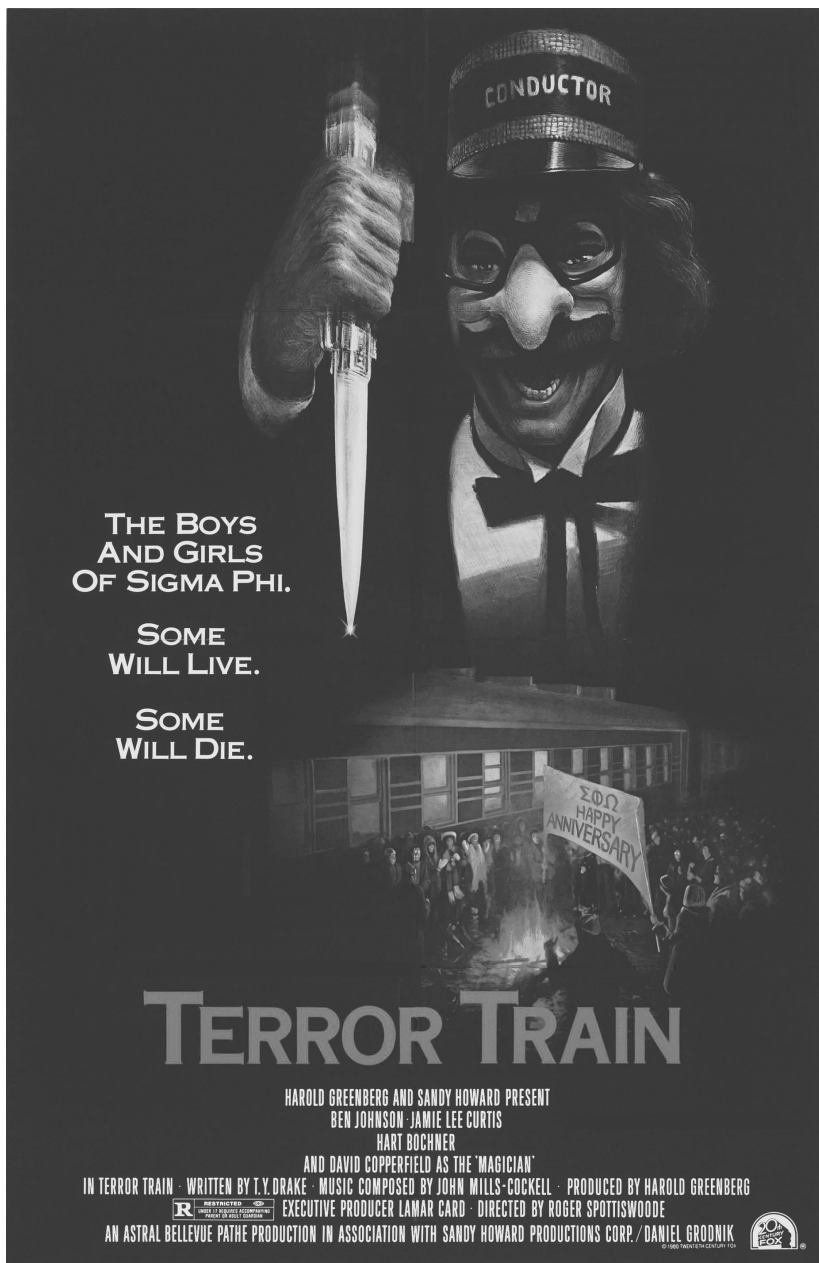


date's original meaning as the winter solstice in the Roman calendar. He's all about the Victorian reinvention of Christmas, a thoroughly Dickensian take on the spirit of the day, emphasising family above all and with an underpinning sense of camaraderie and cheer.

Most specifically, he epitomises the 1822 poem, *A Visit from St. Nicholas*, which bookends the picture and that really places it in one particular era, which emphasises the connection in my mind from Harry to Sam in *Trick 'r Treat*. While both their holidays continue to grow and change over time, Harry and Sam are adamant that their particular interpretations are the correct ones, even though they're rooted in nostalgia for previous times. Show disrespect for their version of the rules that govern their holidays and they'll take you down.

So it's not a lump of coal in your stocking, you defiler of the Spirit of Christmas you, it's an axe to the head or an ornament to the throat. And I kind of dig the irony there. Good will to all men, Harry believes, except those who don't buy into the concept of good will to all men. It really is incredibly appropriate to turn someone like that into a slasher in a Santa suit. My reasons for liking this movie aren't all in sync with John Waters's reasons, but I'll happily agree with him that *Christmas Evil* should become a Christmas tradition of its own.





**THE BOYS  
AND GIRLS  
OF SIGMA PHI.**

**SOME  
WILL LIVE.**

**SOME  
WILL DIE.**

**TERROR TRAIN**

HAROLD GREENBERG AND SANDY HOWARD PRESENT  
BEN JOHNSON JAMIE LEE CURTIS  
HART BOCHNER  
AND DAVID COPPERFIELD AS THE 'MAGICIAN'

IN TERROR TRAIN - WRITTEN BY T.Y. DRAKE - MUSIC COMPOSED BY JOHN MILLS-COCKELL - PRODUCED BY HAROLD GREENBERG  
EXECUTIVE PRODUCER LAMAR CARD - DIRECTED BY ROGER SPOTTISWOODE

AN ASTRAL BELLEVUE PATHE PRODUCTION IN ASSOCIATION WITH SANDY HOWARD PRODUCTIONS CORP. / DANIEL GRODNIK

**R** RESTRICTED  
PARENTS STRONGLY CAUTIONED  
SOME MATERIAL MAY BE INAPPROPRIATE FOR CHILDREN UNDER 17

FOX

## **TERROR TRAIN (1980)**

*New Years Eve*

Director: Roger Spottiswoode

Writer: T. Y. Drake

Stars: Ben Johnson, Jamie Lee Curtis, Hart Bochner and David Copperfield

Slasher movies had been made for a long while by the time *Terror Train* arrived in 1980, but they were fast becoming a huge deal. *Halloween* had kicked off the genre's classic era in 1978, courtesy in large part to its lead actress Jamie Lee Curtis, who cemented her stature as the leading scream queen of the day with *The Fog*, *Prom Night* and this film, all of which were released in 1980. The election of Ronald Reagan the same year brought a conservative backlash against what they saw as a growing epidemic of violence on screen, and the studios got quickly on board, releasing over a hundred slashers between 1978 and 1984.

This one was shot independently in Canada for \$3.5m, but picked up for distribution by 20th Century Fox, who contributed another \$5m worth of marketing. While it isn't the best of the slashers, it is at least one of the most interesting, for a few reasons, including the fact that the majority of the film takes place on a moving steam train booked on New Year's Eve as a celebration for Alana, who's graduating early, making the partygoers a captive audience.

The primary reason is that the constant underlying theme is illusion, emphasised through the surprise presence in the cast of David Copperfield as the magician hired to perform at the party. We've probably all watched half a dozen slasher movies in which the identity of the killer is so obvious that we've shouted it at the screen, even though the line up of victims to be never pay any attention to us. Here, it's a deliberately played trope. The killer doesn't wear one iconic mask that could be slapped on the poster, instead consistently adopting the costume of the previous victim at every

point. The task at hand for each of the potential victims on board the Terror Train is to see through the particular illusion shown them when the killer, whose identity we know from the very first scene, appears to them in a new disguise. If they can, then maybe they'll have a chance at survival, though this is one heck of a party and most of them are drunk before they even get off the bus that takes them to the train.

We know that the killer is one Kenny Hampson, because that's set up immediately in the opening scene from three years earlier. Our cast of characters, who are freshmen at the time, set up poor Kenny to walk into a dorm room with dubious lighting for a date with Alana Maxwell, Jamie Lee Curtis's character. Stripped down to his underwear, he climbs into bed with her, only to find that she's a falling apart corpse that Doc Manley snuck over from the medical school, where he was working as a janitor. Kenny freaks, tangles himself up in the netting of the bed's canopy and almost strangles himself to death, watched by the crowd of students who snuck in for the grand reveal. Later we learn that he didn't die after all but was admitted into a psychiatric hospital, where he's presumably been ever since. Alana quickly regretted the prank, even attempting to visit Kenny in hospital, but Doc, the sociopath that he is, never changed. In fact, the only reason Alana's on the train is because her boyfriend, Mo, pretended that it was his idea rather than Doc's.



Of course, this all ties to a fraternity, this one Epsilon Phi Omega, and it's probably fair to say that the world is divided into those who watch sex comedies and slasher movies from the eighties dearly wishing that they'd pledged to a fraternity and those who watch the very same films and give thanks that they never did. And, if there's any reason for us to sympathise with the frat boys, that reason vanishes as soon as we realise that their prankish ringleader, Doc, is played by the very same actor, Hart Bochner, that played Ellis in *Die Hard*. I actually want to start working through his filmography just to see if there's one title in which we don't want him to die quickly and horribly. He's probably the nicest guy in the world but, my goodness, he plays an asshole so damn well.

Kudos to writer T. Y. Drake for keeping us waiting for satisfaction for so long. Patience is a virtue, young padawan. We have Curtis and Copperfield and a host of other distractions to keep us busy throughout, including a young lady named D. D. Winters, who was soon to be discovered by Prince and renamed to Vanity, but we do get our satisfaction in the end.

We know from the moment the train arrives that things are going to be lively. This is the last big college party for Alana and maybe some of her friends, even if the rest may have another year to go before they graduate pre-med. "My goodness gracious," says the engineer when he catches his first sight of them. He's Carne, played by veteran actor Ben Johnson, who



apparently had a blast making a feature in which almost everyone else was a third of his age. “It’s a rotten crowd,” suggests David Copperfield, who was young and affordable here, but still established, given that he’d joined the Society of American Magicians at the record-breaking age of twelve, taken the lead role in *The Magic Man* at eighteen and hosted his first magic special on TV at nineteen. He was five years older at this point, on his way to becoming the highest grossing solo entertainer in history. It’s fantastic to watch him work in close quarters and, while he’s one note throughout, it’s exactly the right note: talented, arrogant and ominous.

That’s because we’re being set up to believe that Copperfield might be Kenny Hampson, which we don’t buy into until we grasp just how frickin’ cool it would be. Certainly he was there on the platform around the time the first death happens, when Ed the class clown is run through with a magician’s sword before he can even get onto the train. His Groucho Marx costume and his cheap gags do, so prompting the rest of the students to believe that Ed’s still around somewhere. Only we and the killer know that he isn’t. His corpse was left behind, run over by the train as it left the station. Yes, Ed’s dead, baby, Ed’s dead! Later, we start wondering where Copperfield was during each other murder. Was he really on the tiny stage performing in front of drunk students or was he wandering through the train, impressing people with his close up magic and flirting with Alana?





While we're a little surprised at the disco music playing as he levitates his lovely assistant and makes her disappear, he still thrills us. Hey, the boy might have a career!

One neat idea the script has is for the bodies to be discovered not by other students, thus sparking a wide alarm, but by Carne, who must start to believe that they're messing with him. The first one he finds is Jackson, his corpse left inside his lizard suit in a toilet, with blood all over the walls. Sure, he's staged to be drunk but Carne checks for a pulse and there isn't one. However, when he gets one of his colleagues to check out the scene, the blood is all gone and the lizard man is alive, albeit in serious need of help to get off the floor and stumble off to bed. Of course, it's not Jackson any more but Kenny Hampson in his latest borrowed outfit and Carne can perhaps be forgiven for not realising that he'd changed colour. Hey, he's entirely contained in a lizard suit and Carne doesn't know him from Adam anyway. It's the other students who Hampson is challenging with these costume change-driven illusions and it's far harder to explain away their failures, which is, of course, entirely the point. If these kids are that blah about people they've known for three years, will they ever be missed?

The original idea for *Terror Train* came from producer Daniel Grodnik, who eventually took an executive producer role because the film was shot in Canada for tax reasons and Grodnik was American. His goal was to make



“*Halloween on a train*”, which is a fair way to look at the result, especially with Jamie Lee Curtis as the final girl. He even ran the idea past a couple of his friends, John Carpenter and Debra Hill, who had made *Halloween*, and they gave him their blessings for the project. And no, that wasn’t a spoiler about Curtis; did you honestly slate anyone else for the final girl?

There are some major differences between the two movies, though, like the earlier film being deliberately sparse, Michael Myers floating around the suburbs of Haddonfield, mysteriously appearing out of nowhere so he can loom ominously across the street. *Terror Train*, on the other hand, is incredibly busy, everything unfolding within tight spaces, the killer lost in the claustrophobic crowds of drunken students, potentially right next to them at any time and in any direction.

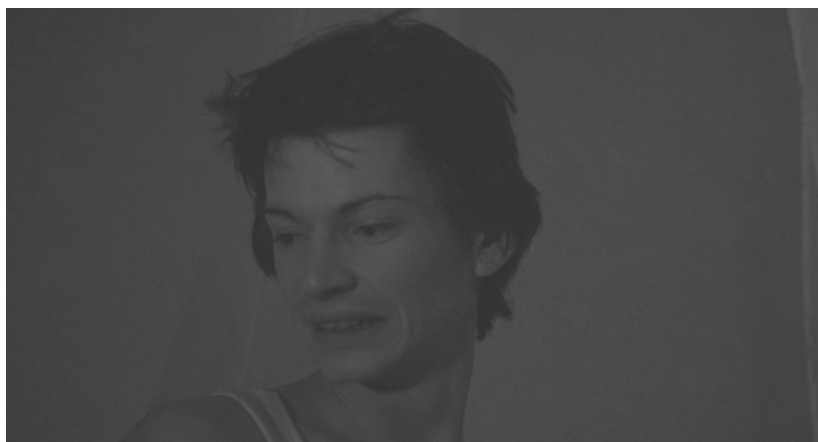
They wisely shot on a real train, leasing an engine and five cars from the Steamtown Foundation in Vermont, a museum that had run their own steam excursions for the previous couple of decades. They repainted them black and redecorated the insides, but cinematographer John Alcott had further work to do to in order to make the shoot viable. He rewired the entire train and fitted dimmers outside the carriages, so that he could light the set quickly and appropriately. He lit individual faces with pen lights and even Christmas lights. Of course, the train didn’t move during takes, the illusion of motion created by crews rocking the carriages by



hand. However, the frat house at the beginning was actually a frat house, at McGill University in Montreal, the very first scene shot on the last but one day, only the killer's death scene still to come. And that's so cold that the stunt man couldn't deal with the temperature. Literally.

The most interesting behind the scenes idea, though, was the choice to cast the killer from outside of usual channels. According to the debuting director, Roger Spottiswoode, who would go on to helm films as far from the genre as *Turner & Hooch* and *Stop! Or My Mom Will Shoot*, although the latter was admittedly horrific even if it wasn't horror, Derek McKinnon wasn't even an actor. "He was a transvestite from the streets of Montreal," he said, an awkward person to work with as he didn't grasp the concept of showing up on time, but that, "He was familiar with that world of cheap theater and was strangely effective." McKinnon appears in a whole host of different forms here, as if he's playing every regeneration of the Doctor in a single movie, and, while his acting talent is obviously minimal, he does have an effective presence. Certainly, he plays one of the more interesting slashers in that genre's far from stellar history. Incidentally, his time in the movies wasn't up, because he went on to a smattering of other roles, as an actor and even as a producer. Maybe he even eventually learned how to be on time.

I'm assuming that everything seen in contemporary time in *Terror Train*



happens on New Year's Eve, as nobody ever counts down to midnight or sings *Auld Lang Syne*, though they might all have been fairly distracted by the simple act of survival on a train that they're sharing with a prolific mystery murderer. However, the only real New Year's Eve tradition that these students adhere to is the gigantic party they're throwing.

As the real holiday is New Year's Day, with all the symbolism of rebirth that shifting one year forward carries, New Year's Eve is, in most cultures, an opportunity to get drunk in preparation for that new beginning that is now mere hours away, rendering it a holiday in the modern sense but far from the holy day that the word "holiday" was derived from.

The other commonplace traditions nowadays are fireworks, live music and the eating of specific foods, which vary by country. Some nations have particular midnight moments, such as the tolling of Big Ben in London or the Bosingak bell in Seoul, or the much watched drop of a twelve foot ball in Times Square. Me, I like the Scottish idea of raising a Glencairn glass of whisky. Sláinte! Now, if only the FDA would allow me to legally eat haggis.

So, happy new year, folks!

Now you can safely turn to page 12 and begin all over again.



*A Horror Movie Calendar*



## DATES

Some of these holidays happen on the same day every year, but some of them move around the calendar, whether in simple or complex fashion:

New Year's Day	1st January
Valentine's Day	14th February
Presidents Day	third Monday in February (in most states)
Mardi Gras	47 days before Easter Sunday
St. Patrick's Day	17th March
April Fools' Day	1st April
Easter Sunday	first Sunday after the first full moon that's on or after 21st March
4/20	20th April
Walpurgisnacht	evening of 30th April to evening of 1st May
Beltane	1st May (in the northern hemisphere)
Cinco de Mayo	5th May
Mother's Day	second Sunday in May (in the U.S.A. and others)
Memorial Day	last Monday in May
Father's Day	third Sunday in June (in the U.S.A. and others)
Summer Solstice	longest day of the year (in the northern hemisphere)
Independence Day	4th July
Ghost Month	the seventh lunar month (Ghost Day is the fifteenth day of Ghost Month)
Friday the 13th	whenever a Friday is the 13th day of a month
Yom Kippur	sunset on 9 Tishrei to sunset on 10 Tishrei
Mischief Night	30th October
Hallowe'en	31st October
Samhain	evening of 31st October to evening of 1st November
Día de Muertos	6.00pm on 1st November to 2nd November
Guy Fawkes Night	5th November
Thanksgiving	fourth Thursday in November (in the U.S.A.)
Hanukkah	sunset on 25 Kislev to sunset on 2 or 3 Tevet
Christmas Eve	24th December
Christmas Day	25th December
New Year's Eve	31st December

*A Horror Movie Calendar*

That translates to these specific dates over the rest of the decade:

<b>Holiday</b>	<b>2022</b>	<b>2023</b>	<b>2024</b>	<b>2025</b>	<b>2026</b>	<b>2027</b>	<b>2028</b>	<b>2029</b>
New Year's Day	1 Jan							
Valentine's Day	14 Feb							
Presidents Day	21 Feb	20 Feb	19 Feb	17 Feb	16 Feb	15 Feb	21 Feb	19 Feb
Mardi Gras	1 Mar	21 Feb	13 Feb	4 Mar	17 Feb	9 Feb	29 Feb	13 Feb
St. Patrick's Day	17 Mar							
April Fool's Day	1 Apr							
Easter Sunday	17 Apr	9 Apr	31 Mar	20 Apr	5 Apr	28 Mar	16 Apr	1 Apr
4/20	20 Apr							
Walpurgisnacht	30 Apr-1 May							
Beltane	1 May							
Cinco de Mayo	5 May							
Mother's Day	8 May	14 May	12 May	11 May	10 May	9 May	14 May	13 May
Memorial Day	30 May	29 May	27 May	26 May	25 May	31 May	29 May	28 May
Father's Day	19 Jun	18 Jun	16 Jun	15 Jun	21 Jun	20 Jun	18 Jun	17 Jun
Summer Solstice	21 Jun	21 Jun	20 Jun	21 Jun	21 Jun	21 Jun	20 Jun	20 Jun
Independence Day	4 Jul							
Ghost Day	12 Aug	30 Aug	18 Aug	6 Sep	27 Aug	16 Aug	3 Sep	24 Aug
Friday the 13th	13 May	13 Jan 13 Oct	13 Sep 13 Dec	13 Jun	13 Feb 13 Mar 13 Nov	13 Aug	13 Apr 13 Jul	13 Sep 13 Dec
Yom Kippur	5 Oct	25 Sep	12 Oct	2 Oct	21 Sep	11 Oct	30 Sep	19 Sep
Mischief Night	30 Oct							
Hallowe'en	31 Oct							
Samhain	31 Oct-1 Nov							
Día de Muertos	1-2 Nov							
Guy Fawkes Night	5 Nov							
Thanksgiving	24 Nov	23 Nov	28 Nov	27 Nov	26 Nov	25 Nov	23 Nov	22 Nov
Hanukkah	18 Dec- 26 Dec	7 Dec- 15 Dec	25 Dec- 2 Jan	14 Dec- 22 Dec	4 Dec- 12 Dec	24 Dec- 1 Jan	12 Dec- 20 Dec	1 Dec- 9 Dec
Christmas Eve	24 Dec							
Christmas Day	25 Dec							
New Year's Eve	31 Dec							

## ABOUT HAL C. F. ASTELL

While he still has a day job to pay the bills, Hal C. F. Astell is a teacher by blood and a writer by the grace of the Dread Lord, which gradually transformed him into a film critic. He primarily writes for his own site, *Apocalypse Later*, but also anyone else who asks nicely. He writes monthly book reviews for the *Nameless Zine*.



Born and raised in the cold and rain of England half a century ago, he's still learning about the word "heat" many years after moving to Phoenix, Arizona where he lives with his much better half Dee in a house full of critters and oddities, a library with a ghost guard ferret and more cultural artefacts than can comfortably be imagined. And he can imagine quite a lot.

Just in case you care, his favourite film is Peter Jackson's debut, *Bad Taste*; his favourite actor is Warren William; and he believes Carl Theodor Dreyer's

*The Passion of Joan of Arc* is the greatest movie ever made.

He reads science fiction, horror and the pulps. He listens to everything except mainstream western pop music. He annoys those around him by talking too much about Guy N. Smith, Doc Savage and the *Friday Rock Show*. He tries not to go outdoors, but he's usually easy to find at film festivals, conventions and events because he's likely to be the only one there in kilt and forked beard, while his fading English accent is instantly recognisable on podcasts and panels. He hasn't been trepanned yet, but he's friendly and doesn't bite unless asked.

Photo Credit: Dee Astell



## ABOUT APOCALYPSE LATER

Initially, Hal C. F. Astell wrote film reviews for his own reference as he could never remember who the one good actor was in forgettable episodes of long crime film series from the forties. After a year, they became long enough to warrant a dedicated blog.

The name came from an abandoned project in which he was reviewing his way through every movie in the IMDb Top 250 list. Its tentative title was a joke drawn from covering *Apocalypse Now* last.

Gradually he focused on writing at length about the sort of films that most critics don't, avoiding adverts, syndication and monetised links, not to forget the eye-killing horror of white text on a black background.

Four million words later and Apocalypse Later Press was born, in order to publish his first book, cunningly titled *Huh?* It's been followed by half a dozen others with double digits more always in process.

This growth eventually turned into the Apocalypse Later Empire, which continues to sprawl. In addition to film and book reviews, he posts a pair of album reviews each weekday from across the rock/metal spectrum and around the globe. He runs the only dedicated annual genre film festival in Phoenix, AZ, the Apocalypse Later International Fantastic Film Festival, or ALIFFF. He publishes books by himself and others. He presents programs of quality international short films at conventions across the southwest.

Apocalypse Later is celebrating its fifteenth anniversary in 2022.

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