APOCALYPSE LATER
THE FIRST THIRTY
PAM GRIER

APOCALYPSE LATER

ZINE

ISSUE #9

APOCALYPSE LATER BOOKS
BY HAL C. F. ASTELL

FILM

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APOCALYPSE LATER ZINE #9

THE FIRST THIRTY

FILM RUNTHROUGH
PAM GRIER

BY HAL C. F. ASTELL

APOCALYPSE LATER

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If you've got to this point after reading my first *First Thirty* zine, on Nicolas Cage, welcome back! If you're new here, welcome anyway!

This zine is where I look at the early careers of people important to film by watching their First Thirty movies and watching them grow into the stars they became. I'm having a huge amount of fun with these, reacquainting myself with old favourites and filling in gaps with a wild array of films I've often never previously heard of.

I cherish your thoughts, so join me on social media or chat with me at events. I have a list of future subjects but it's surprisingly difficult to track down every one of the First Thirty of so many people, even some of today's biggest names, so I can't cover everyone I want.

As I mentioned last time out, I hope you all join me for further First Thirties. I'll be posting each review to Apocalypse Later Film as I go and sharing them on social media. Right now that's Facebook, Instagram, Tribel and Twitter.

And, if you're waiting for the big reveal about who's next, it's going to be the First Thirty of Vincent Price!

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INTRODUCTION

Welcome to my second First Thirty, focused on one of my favourite actresses, Pam Grier. Even though I'd seen so many of her most important films, I'd missed out on even more.

Watching her First Thirty underlines how I've become fascinated by career trajectories.

My first subject, Nicolas Cage, followed a relatively straightforward rise fall rise arc through his First Thirty. He started out as nobody but grew in stature quickly, with some substantial lead roles and pivotal supporting slots early on, only for his career to falter. He struggled to reaffirm himself and eventually got back onto a strong footing. Of course, his story doesn't end there.

Pam Grier's career trajectory starts out similarly, but then takes a very different turn and there aren't any good reasons why. There simply wasn't a place for a tough African American woman like her in many Hollywood movies of the eighties and thats a real shame.

Like Cage, she started out as nobody, with a debut role in *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls* so small that I had to frame advance to even find her in the background. Like Cage, she found substantial lead roles early, in her instance finding a niche in Filipino women in prison movies, along with a perfect screen partner in Sid Haig, and appearing in genre highlights like *The Big Bird Cage*. When those dried up, she shifted Stateside and did exactly the same thing in blaxploitation, building into genre highlights like *Coffy* and *Foxy Brown*. Her First Fifteen is glorious.

It's also astoundingly quick. Her first film was in 1970 and she knocked out fifteen of them in the first half of the seventies. In the second half, she only made three, none of them remotely as impactful, and it took fifteen years for her to finish up her First Thirty.

Like Cage, her career floundered but, unlike Cage, she didn't get lead roles during that time. She doesn't have a lead role in any of her second fifteen. Sure, the genres she thrived in had passed their heyday but she continued to prove her talent in whatever roles she was given and it's criminal that she wasn't given more, in number, in length and in quality.

As a slight counter, her supporting roles were often important ones. She gets very little screen time in *Fort Apache, the Bronx*, for instance, but her role is fundamental to the story and she does an incredible job with the few scenes she has. While they might feel missable on a blind watch, her roles in *The Package* and *Bill & Ted's Bogus Journey* are crucial to how those stories wrap up.

Of course, that wasn't a rule. In too many of these eighties films, her part was both skimpy and insubstantial, falling to the level of *On the Edge*, an excellent picture from which she was cut for its theatrical release without any impact on the movie itself. At least she got a few chances to go hog wild and have fun, like *Fort Apache, the Bronx*, *The Vindicator* and *Class of 1999*.

Finally, like Cage, her story doesn't end with film #30, but hers doesn't pick up until #39, when Quentin Tarantino brought her back to prominence with a long overdue lead in *Jackie Brown*. But that's another story. This is about her First Thirty and it's all here. Enjoy!

— Hal C. F. Astell, June 2023

This time...
they've
really
gone
Beyond
the Valley
of the
Dolls
A Russ Meyer Production
The world
is full of them,
the super-octane
girls who are
old at twenty
If they get to be twenty.
From 20th Century-Fox Starring DOLLY READ / CYNTHIA MYERS / MARCIA MC BROOM / JOHN LA ZAR / MICHAEL BLODGETT / DAVID GURIAN
Co-starring EDY WILLIAMS / Produced and Directed by RUSS MEYER / Screenplay by ROGER EBERT / Story by ROGER EBERT and RUSS MEYER
PANAVISION® Color by DE LUXE®
Hear THE SANDPIPERS and THE STRAWBERRY ALARM CLOCK on the original soundtrack album from 20th Century-Fox records
This is not a sequel—
there has never been
anything like it
X
NO ONE UNDER 17 ADMITTED
COPYRIGHT © 1970 TWENTIETH CENTURY-FOX FILM CORPORATION
70/179

BEYOND THE VALLEY OF THE DOLLS (1970)

DIRECTOR: RUSS MEYER

WRITER: ROGER EBERT, BASED ON A STORY BY ROGER EBERT AND RUSS MEYER

STARS: DOLLY READ, CYNTHIA MYERS, MARCIA MCBROOM, JOHN LA ZAR, MICHAEL BLODGETT AND DAVID GURIAN

It has to be said that Pam Grier didn't shine in her debut movie but it was hardly her fault. The only line she was given was cut and so she decorates the background of a single scene for a measly two seconds, half of which is stolen by the gentleman who bobs up in front of her. It took me frame advancing through an entire party scene to even find her. She's highlighted by the arrow in the first image overleaf just in case she's still elusive.

And that's it for her in *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls*. Needless to say, she has no influence whatsoever on the quality of this picture.

I've seen this film before but I'm amazed by it afresh every time I watch it again. Sure, it's an exploitative cash-in by cult filmmaker Russ Meyer on the success of *Valley of the Dolls*, an immensely popular book by Jacqueline Susann that became an immensely popular movie that was, shall we say, critically unacclaimed.

But it was written by a certain Roger Ebert, a nobody at the time who incurred the wrath of his future screen partner, Gene Siskel, who ranked it amongst his worst films of the year, pointing out: "boredom aplenty is provided by a screenplay which for some reason has been turned over to a screenwriting neophyte." He may have been a neophyte but he was happy to parody everything, not merely *Valley of the Dolls* but the entirety of Hollywood.

And, quite frankly, as much as he admits it's "pure movie without message", it's also ahead of its time, enough so that it shocks us. There are black characters everywhere but nobody cares about skin colour. There are obviously gay characters too, both male and female, and sexual encounters between each. Eccentrically flamboyant Z-Man is a transsexual who clearly paved the way for Frank-N-Furter in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. And one other character, initially ablebodied, has scenes in a wheelchair after the script rolls over him. While I was just a gleam in 1970, I don't remember it being at all this diverse on screen.

Perhaps some of it's due to Meyer being the director. Certainly, this fits a lot more with his other work than I recall, as irreverent as his later boob-obsessed pictures, with many of the same tropes, and with his recognisable habit of rarely moving the camera but suggesting motion through clever rapid fire editing.

Mostly, I feel, it's due to Ebert having carte blanche to make an exploitation picture for a major studio, 20th Century Fox. If they were to let him do this, then why not do that and *that* and, well, everything else? So he did, which is why the title is so appropriate. The core of the story is the same: three young girls seek fame in Hollywood and things may or may not end well for them. But it's *more* in every way, far beyond what we expect a studio to be OK with. That goes double for the ending, created after

the Manson Family's infamous murder spree, which feels acutely shocking for 1970.

The three girls here constitute a rock band, initially called the Kelly Affair. Unsurprisingly for Meyer, two of them are Playboy Playmates while the other easily could have been if she had been interested. Dolly Read, the Playmate of the Month for May 1966, is lead vocalist and guitarist Kelly MacNamara. Cynthia Myers, of the December 1968 issue, is bass player Casey Anderson. That leaves Marcia McBroom, a dancer and bona fide actress, as drummer Petronella Danforth.

There's also an unofficial fourth member of the band, Harris Allsworth, who's both Kelly's boyfriend and their manager, not that he gets to remain either for long after they encounter the Z-Man. That's Ronnie Barzell, a producer influential enough that the Strawberry Alarm Clock perform at an extravagant party that he throws in his house. That's cool, man. He was apparently based on Phil Spector, which only makes the final scenes even more prophetic.

John LaZar is as wild as could be imagined in this role, delivering all his hip dialogue in the vein of a Shakespearean actor, and it's easy to see how anyone would soon be forgotten once he's in the picture. He collects cool people and Harris just isn't cool enough, which opens the door for porn star Ashley St. Ives, in the lovely form of Edy Williams, soon to be the second Mrs. Russ Meyer, to steal his attentions.

Z-Man is impressed by the Kelly Affair, most especially Kelly herself, so he signs them and renames them to the Carrie Nations, at which point the sky's the limit. However, there's no guarantee that they'll get that high in a film that's as full of exploitation excess as this one, and it shouldn't count as a spoiler that not all three make it out alive.

Originally, this was meant to be an entirely serious sequel to *Valley of the Dolls*, but it went through various incarnations before the twin subversives of Meyer and Ebert were brought on board. Even now, it's a movie that could be taken seriously for maybe half of its running time. Eventually, though, it's so eager to leap into overblown soap opera land that even the most naïve viewer ought to acknowledge how it's veered into parody and, at that point, they ought to realise how everything before works just as well as parody, merely without being as blatant about it.

Suddenly every scene is comedy gold, with a suicide attempt, surprise pregnancies, even an abortion. "You will drink the black sperm of my vengeance!" is not a line you expect from a mainstream movie, especially given the next events. But here, it fits rather naturally with a caped Superwoman, a Nazi in full uniform and a shocking decapitation.

Of course, there's a happy ending suitable for a soap opera, even if it's merely for a select few of an ensemble cast so busy that it's easy to get lost early on. And, just because, there's an overblown moralising narration to wrap up the wrap up.

Not everything works here, but enough of it does to let us get whisked away into a world of Hollywood parties, where everyone you see is someone. He's a gigolo actor. He's a villainous lawyer out to fleece the heroine's aunt. He's a surprise appearance of an old flame. He's the heavyweight champion of the world. You get the picture, darling?

And, somewhere hiding in the background, are other people. Coleman Francis, director of *The Beast of Yucca Flats*, ended his career in a bit part, while Pam Grier began hers. Unless you blink and miss her.

THEY CAGED THEIR BODIES
BUT NOT THEIR DESIRES
Soft young girls behind hard prison bars...
They'd do anything for a man— or to him!
Boiling passions confined behind concrete walls.
Naked lust that builds to a climax of death.
COLOR BY DELUXE
R
BIG DOLL HOUSE
STARRING
JUDY BROWN · ROBERTA COLLINS · PAM GRIER
BROOKE MILLS · PAT WOODELL · SID HAIG
PRODUCED BY JANE SCHAFFER
DIRECTED BY DON SPENCER
DIRECTED BY JACK HILL
A NEW WORLD PICTURES RELEASE · COLOR BY DELUXE
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71/150

THE BIG DOLL HOUSE (1971)

DIRECTOR: JACK HILL

WRITER: JACK HILL

STARS: JUDY BROWN, ROBERTA COLLINS, PAM GRIER, BROOKE MILLS, PAT WOODELL AND SID HAIG

If Pam Grier was hardly in *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls*, she more than made up for that in what could be considered her real debut, this pioneering exploitation film shot by legendary director Jack Hill for an even more legendary producer, Roger Corman.

It didn't start the Women in Prison genre, as that had evolved over decades, from precodes focused on tough female convicts like *Up the River* and *Ladies They Talk About*, through more dedicated prison movies in the fifties such as *Caged* and *Women's Prison* to Jess Franco's 1969 exploitation flick *99 Women*, with Herbert Lom and Mercedes McCambridge of all people, that inspired Corman to take his own shot at it.

But, with *99 Women* setting the stage, *Love Camp 7* then invented the Nazi WiP subgenre and *The Big Doll House* invented the jungle WiP subgenre. Every successful genre spawns a set of subgenres that thrive for a while and likely fade away soon afterwards. For a while, both these dominated exploitation cinema and Pam Grier was notable in the latter.

And it all started here, with her singing the opening theme, *Long-time Woman*, a song that was appropriately reused in Tarantino's *Jackie Brown*, given that this truly started her career and that restarted it. She shows up on screen very quickly, demonstrating character before anything actually happens and not needing a line of dialogue in order to do so.

However, she's not the lead, because that's the new fish arriving in some unnamed prison in the Philippines. We only know that's where we are because the film was shot there and the Government House sign is written in Tagalog; the prison has no interest in identifing itself.

Anyway, that new fish is Marnie Collier, who's given 99 years hard labour for murder. She's a pretty brunette played by Judy Brown, who had quite a career in the seventies, and she's quickly thrown into a cell with five other girls. Well, not quite that quickly. She's strip searched first—"Search them inside and out" commands the butch and sadistic head guard, Lucian. Then a bloodied corpse is carried past her on a stretcher. It doesn't look like an easy 99 years.

Her five new cellmates are a memorable lot. Alcott is a take charge sort who introduces her to everyone. Grear is a dominant lesbian who takes charge of her in another way. Bodine is a tough revolutionary whose boyfriend Rafael is up in the hills fighting for the cause, whatever cause that happens to be. Ferina is a local girl. And Harrad is a wreck of a drug addict.

Pam Grier, playing Grear, which similarity in name seems to be coincidence, is easily the most obvious of the bunch from moment one. She's a little raw in her delivery, as befitting her speaking debut, but she looks great, has strong presence and is clearly comfortable in whatever the part has in store for her.

Over time, as we get to know each of these

girls much better, it's Brooke Mills who shines the brightest as Harrad. This isn't a film we'll ever remember for its acting prowess but she gets a gift of a part and she gives it her all. She may be the least sympathetic character among the prisoners, locked up for a good reason, but she's portrayed with depth and subtle power.

Reasons don't really matter, of course. She's in for killing her own baby, but the rest fit into the banana republic dictatorship background. Of course, Bodine's in for political reasons, but Grear wasn't locked up for being a hooker, just because a government john told her too much. Even Collier had mitigating circumstances, as her husband was doing the houseboys, so she killed him before he could kill her.

However much subtext he throws in, Hill is far more interested in making this film fun, so he sets up all the things we expect nowadays from Women in Prison movies and plays them lighter than the norm would soon require.

Of course, the head guard is a butch lesbian with a fondness for torture, but Hill gives her a king cobra in a sack to lower towards victims like she's a James Bond villain.

Of course, there's a catfight, but Hill sets up Grear vs. Alcott as a mud wrestling bout in a shallow river.

Of course, there's a mysterious villain with a voyeurism fetish, but Hill makes him a hooded mystery with a riding crop.

And of course, there are shower scenes, but Hill has one of the few male characters in the film spy on Alcott while she's showering, with the result that she rapes him rather than the other way round. "Get it up or I'll cut it off!" is a priceless exploitation line.

The only serious moment that has any clear meaning is the cremation scene, of that body on the stretcher. She's burned outside and we pan up to the chimney backed by barbed wire and can't fail to see the parallel to Nazi death camps like Auschwitz. It's a sobering moment in a film that otherwise aims to entertain.

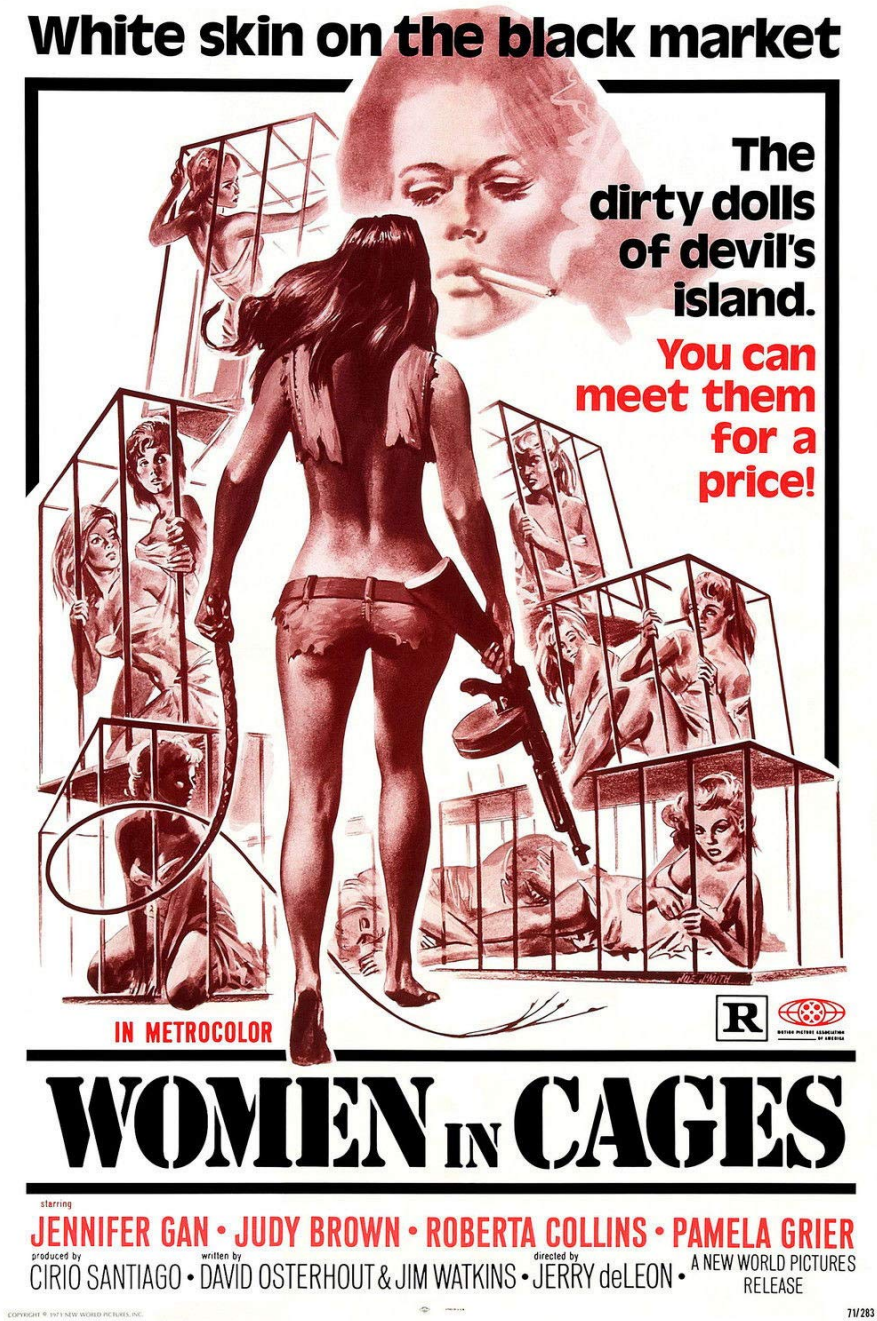
And, talking of entertaining, I mentioned a man in this female prison. The only one with a need to be there ongoing is the doctor, as each of the other staff members from warden down to grunts are female. However, two other men do pop in every once in a while and Hill knows exactly how to use them to spice things up.

They're Harry and Fred, who bring produce to sell—or trade for favours—to prisoners and guards. Jerry Franks is good as Fred, a naïve noob being shown the ropes. He's the one who Alcott rapes, albeit not for long because they get interrupted. However Sid Haig is glorious as Harry, the voice of experience who knows it all and may well have done a lot of it. He has a striped shirt and a thick moustache and he has fantastic chemistry with Pam Grier, which will not surprise anyone who's seen much of either in the seventies. He's a huge amount of fun.

The Big Doll House is a rough production with little polish. The sets are TV show level. Much of the acting is poor and things don't move as quickly as they should. The shock reveal of the villain's identity isn't remotely surprising.

However, it created the template for this sort of film, from the little details to the grand sweep, which is naturally wrapped up by a big escape scene and a dose of delicious karma.

Because Grier and Haig were here for movie number one, they got brought back to do more of the same. Grier followed it up with *Women in Cages*, without Haig but shuffling roles with a few of her female colleagues in this picture. Then she teamed up with him for both *The Big Bird Cage* and *Black Mama, White Mama*. And I'll be covering them all shortly.


White skin on the black market
The dirty dolls of devil's island.
You can meet them for a price!
IN METROCOLOR
R
WOMEN IN CAGES
starring
JENNIFER GAN • JUDY BROWN • ROBERTA COLLINS • PAMELA GRIER
produced by CIRIO SANTIAGO • written by DAVID OSTERHOUT & JIM WATKINS • directed by JERRY deLEON •
A NEW WORLD PICTURES RELEASE
71/283

WOMEN IN CAGES (1971)

DIRECTOR: GERRY DE LEON

WRITERS: JAMES H. WATKINS AND DAVID R. OSTERHOUT

STARS: JUDY BROWN, ROBERTA COLLINS, JENNIFER GAN AND PAM GRIER

When I mentioned in my review of *The Big Doll House* that Jack Hill played it for fun but the jungle women in prison subgenre soon got more vicious, I wasn't expecting it to happen quite so quickly as this. For half its running time, this is pretty close to being the same film but it grows into something much more and it definitely has more of a vicious streak.

Watching them together as a double bill is a real eye-opener, because the similarities go far beyond what you might expected.

Sure, a young lady is convicted of a crime in the Philippines and sent to a jungle prison, but it's exactly the same prison as in *The Big Doll House*. The budget ran to a sign here, reading Carcel del Infierno, or Hell Prison.

Initially, I thought it was the same cell, but it's one down, Cell No. 2 rather than Cell No. 3, so new graffiti but familiar girls. Three of the cast of *The Big Doll House* returned, but their roles were shuffled in a worthy approach.

The new fish is Jeff, played by a giant of an actress called Jennifer Gan—she was Amazon #2 in *In Like Flint*, but better known to Corman fans as Marlene in *Naked Angels*. In *The Big Doll House*, Jeff was Collier, played by Judy Brown, who's back but moving up to play Sandy, the tough chick in charge of the cell.

The Sandy role was Alcott last time out, in the form of Roberta Collins, who's also here, as Janelle Stokowski, better known as Stoke, the drug addict in the cell, such an opportunity in the previous film for Brooke Mills as Harrad.

That just leaves the Filipina local, who has a new name and face, Theresa not Ferina, with Sofia Moran taking over from Gina Stuart. And that's because there are only four women in this cell, because there's no replacement for Bodine the revolutionary and Pam Grier isn't cellbound this time.

Instead, she took on the role of the sadistic lesbian chief matron, Alabama, and plays her with absolute relish. She's still deliberate but it works better here, because she's in charge and she knows it. Kathryn Loder played Lucian as a clinical cold blooded killer in *The Big Doll House*, but Grier is all hot blood as Alabama, a manipulative mistress with a taste for torture.

She's given some glorious new sets to play with. Her rooms are lit in lurid red with some weird symbol on the door, into which Theresa runs gleefully to strip off for her. Then there's the Playpen, a well equipped torture chamber that grows as the film runs on.

Sandy's the first victim. She's walked past the guillotine and the wheel and the nooses to be stripped naked and strapped into a pair of metal boots bolted to the floor. That floor then slides, thus parting her legs so that Alabama can slide a hot brazier between them. Needless to say, Sandy can't even stand up for her hard labour in the fields the next day.

Of course, Jeff doesn't have a great couple of days either. The strip search is quicker, but

there's delousing after the inevitable fire hose shower. She fails to eat a poisoned sandwich—that kills a large rat instead—but she wakes up in the morning to get stabbed in a fight that she wasn't even part of. Hard labour is kind of the highlight for her.

For a film that owes so much to *The Big Doll House*, it's surprisingly a better one. It's more fleshed out, even during the textbook women in prison scenes, but there's far more coming once we get to the inevitable prison break.

It certainly delivers more action from the outset: catfights, torture and sadism a plenty. There's an escape attempt in the fields and an impactul response when the girls are caught and returned dead to the prison by trackers. I didn't count the boobs, but there seemed to be a lot more of them, especially given two mass shower scenes.

Grier has glorious Playpen scenes, with new torture implements each time: the wheel gets used, even an electric shock device. Oddly, she plays into some yellow peril tropes, with red lights and opium pipes, even though she's an African American woman eager with a whip.

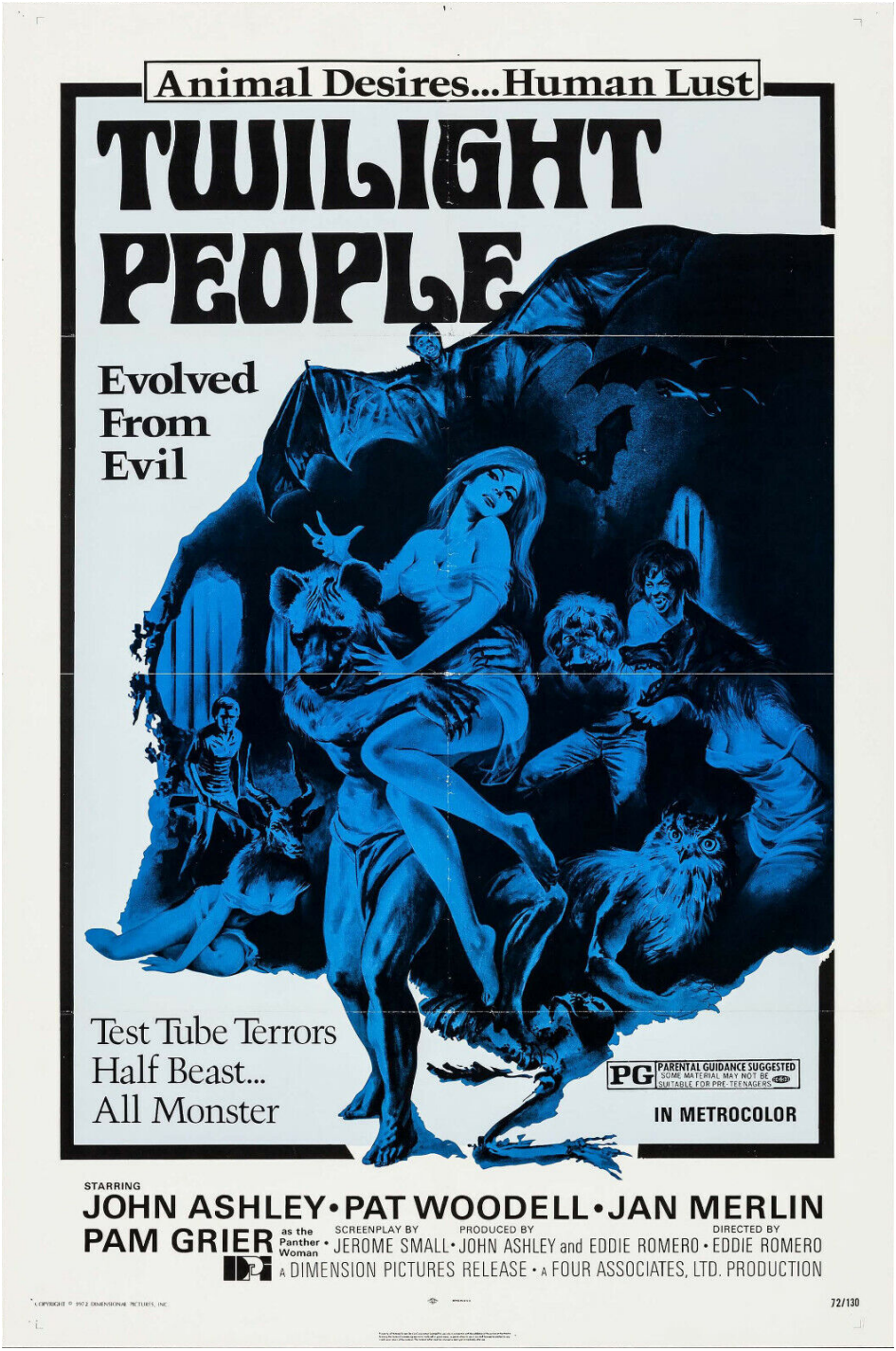
And there are are assassination attempts in the cell, because there's an actual story here that goes beyond the genre, the title not just sadistic hyperbole; the cages aren't restricted to prison walls, but flimsier ones on board the Zulu Queen, a sin ship in which local crooks drug women and force them into a life of prostitution serving American sailors or locals with enough cash.

You see, unlike Collier who had murdered her husband, Jeff is an innocent. Well, sort of. She starts out at a cockfight, eagerly enjoying the violence but unaware that her companion is there with a bag of cash to be swapped for a bag of drugs. When he sees the police arriving, he slips that block of heroin into her bag, with the line, I kid you not, "Hold this for me and don't tell anyone where you got it. I'll explain later." She's so naïve that she keeps believing that he's going to get her out of prison for far too long, even though Rudy's secretly paying Stoke to kill her—that poisoned sandwich, the snake that's slipped through the cell window, even acid poured into the hotbox while she's being punished with isolation.

Eventually, of course, she wants out, so talk of prison break begins and *Women in Cages* eclipses *The Big Doll House* with its much larger framework. Four girls make it out, but they take Alabama with them as a hostage, which only gives Grier more opportunity to shine, merely in a subservient role rather than a dominant one, especially given that Theresa, her former prison plaything, is one of those four girls.

I don't want to spoil where this goes, but it's not just a women in prison movie. It becomes a more conventional thriller, but in more than one way, moving through sequences that we'd place in particular genres to get back to where it began. It's also unflinching about what it's willing to do and who it's going to do it to. It isn't just "harsh, harsh, harsh", as Tarantino described it, because there are happy endings here along with what he appropriately called a final shot of "devastating despair". It finds an awful reality, even though it's an exploitation movie first and foremost.

I enjoyed this one a lot more than I did *The Big Doll House*. It's a bigger and more ambitious movie. It's better acted, better shot and better explored. Pam Grier is a revelation in this one, relishing her shift from victim to villain. The only thing it doesn't have is Sid Haig.


Animal Desires...Human Lust
TWILIGHT PEOPLE
Evolved From Evil
Test Tube Terrors
Half Beast...
All Monster
PG PARENTAL GUIDANCE SUGGESTED
SOME MATERIAL MAY NOT BE SUITABLE FOR PRE-TEENAGERS
IN METROCOLOR
STARRING
JOHN ASHLEY • PAT WOODELL • JAN MERLIN
PAM GRIER as the Panther Woman
SCREENPLAY BY JEROME SMALL • PRODUCED BY JOHN ASHLEY and EDDIE ROMERO • DIRECTED BY EDDIE ROMERO
A DIMENSION PICTURES RELEASE • A FOUR ASSOCIATES, LTD. PRODUCTION
72/130

THE TWILIGHT PEOPLE (1972)

DIRECTOR: EDDIE ROMERO

WRITER: JEROME SMALL

STARS: JOHN ASHLEY, PAT WOODELL, JAN MERLIN AND PAM GRIER

In 1971, officially, at least, there had only been one big screen adaptation of H. G. Wells's seminal novel, *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, namely the famous precode, *Island of Lost Souls*, which had been banned in the UK. Unofficially, there had been many, often made in the Philippines, where Gerry de Leon, director of Pam Grier's previous film, *Women in Cages*, started a horror boom in 1959 with one of them, *Terror is a Man*.

It seems appropriate then that Grier would stay in the Philippines after her two women in prison flicks and diversify her range with yet another *Island of Dr. Moreau* rip-off, this one directed by Eddie Romero, a co-producer and uncredited director on *Terror is a Man*.

It's not a good effort, but it has its moments. It starts out well with an underwater segment, someone scuba diving in tropical waters full of shoals of fish set to an exotica soundtrack. It's all very nice but then the title arrives and the music gets sinister. After the opening credits, we remain in the water waiting for a story to show up and suddenly there it is, because our unwary diver is caught, tied up and hauled up onto a ship to be anaesthetised.

He's Matt Farrell, an adventurer, known as the Last Renaissance Man, and he's caught by Steinman, an adventurer himself, by the order of Dr. Gordon, a reclusive genius who clearly inspires fierce loyalty in his followers.

Eventually we get to meet him, in his huge house at the top of an island, but we're given a few hints first at someone or something in the undergrowth who's watching the trucks drive Farrell up there. We don't know what yet, but the opening credits provided us with hints in some of the character names: Panther Woman, Antelope Man, Bat Man (no, not that one), Ape Man and Wolf Woman.

Gordon, in the form of Charles Macaulay, is a relatively typical mad scientist who doesn't believe himself to be mad. He rants about the "single most important event in the history of life on this planet", something he's preparing for in his work. What could that be, you ask? Well, "The world is changing. Man isn't. We're not equipped." Just in case you hadn't caught any Dr. Moreau vibes, he hazards, "The human race cannot survive if it doesn't remake itself."

And so we're set. Gordon is a mad scientist. His beautiful daughter, Neva, is his assistant, though she's questioning his morality, and an obvious future love interest for Farrell, who's his latest subject, selected for his mental and physical abilities. Steinman is the henchman who keeps his beady eye on Farrell because he clearly relishes the potential challenge of the new arrival doing a runner, at which point we would find ourselves moving out of *The Island of Dr. Moreau* and into *The Most Dangerous Game*. What are the odds of that happening? Well, I certainly wouldn't bet against it.

Romero can't make the Island of Dr. Gordon particularly sinister, even when we get to the

inevitable hunt, but he does a little better with his mansion. Farrell is able to roam around at leisure and explore the place, down to rooting around in Gordon's office when the guards are busy not doing anything, so provides us with a little useful back story.

Eventually, of course, he stumbles onto the secret wall that leads down to a dungeon full of cages, each occupied by an animal/human hybrid, and that's what we've been waiting for all along. Well, I say "full" but there aren't too many of them, perhaps suggesting either that Dr. Gordon isn't very good at his job or that he hsan't been doing it for long.

This is also when Pam Grier arrives, because she's Ayesa, the Panther Woman, and it seems like she has a lot of fun playing up her sensual and feral sides. Given Farrell's presence, we're pretty sure that Gordon has been turning men and women into animals rather than the other way around but, in every instance, the animal side is gradually taking over and that change is most pronounced in Ayesa. She's clearly the most dangerous of the bunch and the one who seems most likely to stop walking on two legs.

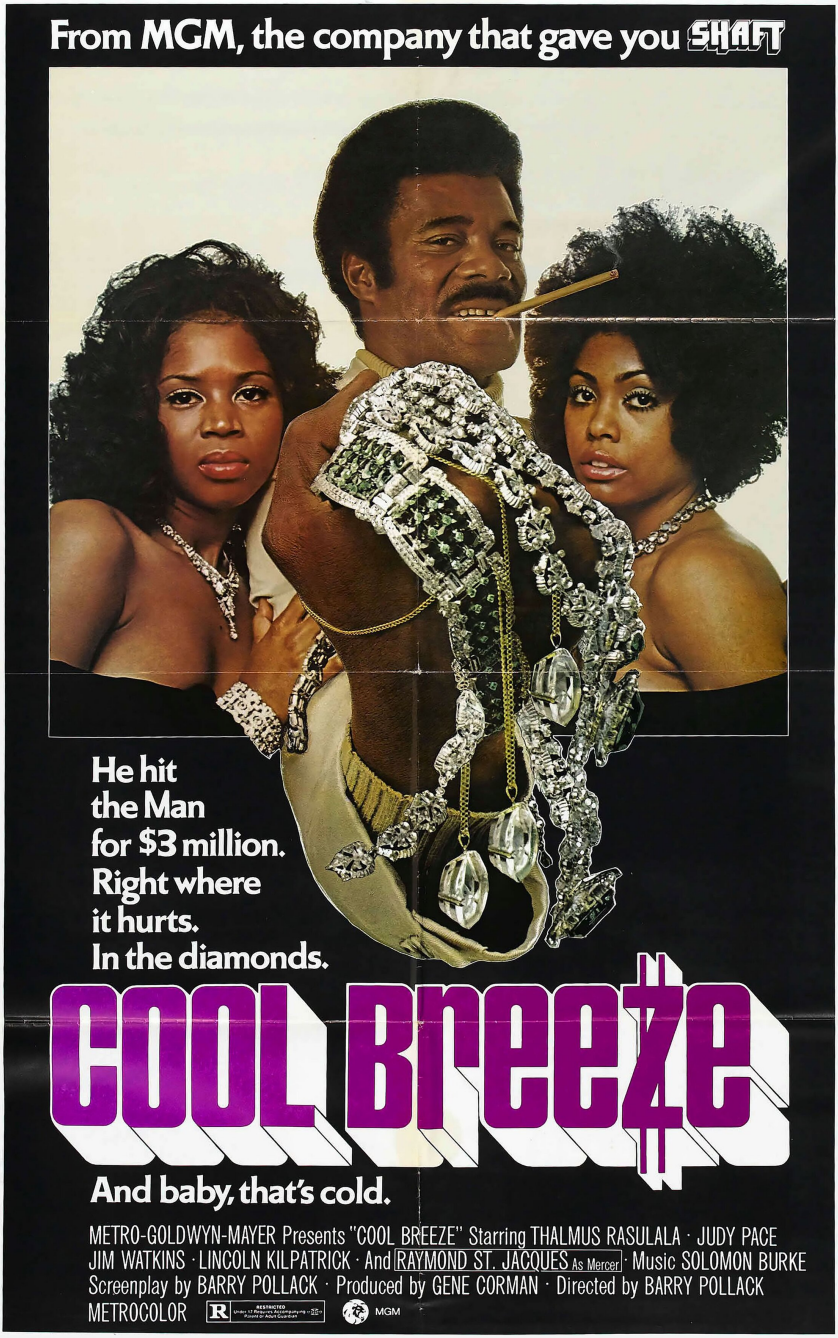
It's easy to imagine exploitation fans in 1971 becoming fast fans of Grier because of her first two women in prison pictures. She wasn't the lead in either but she had plenty to do in both and she met the challenge. Anyone back then going to see *The Twilight People* because of her presence in the cast might have left a little disappointed, not because she doesn't do what the script tasks her to do but because she has no lines beyond mostly overdubbed snarls and she's hidden beneath a poor make-up job.

At least she's not Lupa, the Wolf Woman, as she doesn't even look like a wolf. What sort of weird Filipino wolves are green? She looks like a Lizard Woman to me. In some bizarre cross-species attraction, she gets close with Kuzma, the Antelope Man, who at least boasts a pair of horns to live up to his billing. Primo, the Ape Man, just bounds about because he can't climb trees. Darmo, the Bat Man, can and does so as often as he can, hanging upside down from the branches so his huge wings can make a better silhouette. Eventually he flies and should have done it much sooner.

While Tony Gosalvez is a trooper as Bat Man and Jan Merlin plays Steinman with sinister relish, the best reasons to watch are Grier and Pat Woodell. Grier is sleek and animalistic and she gets to rip out a few throats, even if she should have been given more to do. Woodell, who was the first of two Bobbie Jo Bradleys on *Petticoat Junction*, gets the only character with a real story arc and she takes that seriously.

Beyond them, there aren't a heck of a lot of reasons to track this one down. The location is decent, but the story is weak and predictable. What's more, it's played more as a drama than an exploitation film, which is a clear mistake. Filipino movies often played in this ballpark and, while many of them also had weak and predictable stories, they benefitted from blood and boobs. This one hasn't got enough of the former and it entirely forgot about the latter.

Personally, this was also awkward because of a particular piece of music that shows up on four separate occasions. It's called *Approaching Menace*, by British composer Neil Richardson, and it might have worked here if it didn't also become the theme to *Mastermind*, an iconic TV quiz show, starting in 1972 and continuing to today. Whenever menace approached, I heard Magnus Magnusson saying, "I've started so I'll finish" and that really didn't help this movie, which frankly needed all the help it could get.


From MGM, the company that gave you SHAFT
He hit
the Man
for $3 million.
Right where
it hurts.
In the diamonds.
COOL BREEZE
And baby, that's cold.
METRO-GOLDWYN-MAYER Presents "COOL BREEZE" Starring THALMUS RASULALA · JUDY PACE
JIM WATKINS · LINCOLN KILPATRICK · And RAYMOND ST. JACQUES As Mercer · Music SOLOMON BURKE
Screenplay by BARRY POLLACK · Produced by GENE CORMAN · Directed by BARRY POLLACK
METROCOLOR
R
MGM

COOL BREEZE (1972)

DIRECTOR: BARRY POLLACK

WRITER: BARRY POLLACK, BASED ON A NOVEL BY W. R. BURNETT

STARS: THALMUS RASULALA, JUDY PACE, JIM WATKINS, LINCOLN KILPATRICK AND RAYMOND ST. JACQUES

While *Cool Breeze* was written by its director, Barry Pollack, there's an early credit to say it's based on a novel by W. R. Burnett. Strangely, it isn't interested in saying which novel, because it's *The Asphalt Jungle*, famously filmed in 1950 with Sterling Hayden and Louis Calhern, with *The Badlanders* in 1958 retelling the story as a western and *Cairo* in 1963 taking it to Egypt.

This, in case you weren't able to guess from the poster, is a blaxploitation movie, so it's an inner city look at how the American black man is ripped off by Whitey and it only seems fair to rip him off in return, to the tune of $3m in diamonds. Oddly, the city is Los Angeles rather than New York, but everything else applies.

Opening credits highlight that it's an MGM picture, trying to stay relevant with the black audience after their huge success with *Shaft* a year earlier; it was produced by Gene Corman, who was Roger's older brother; and it features the work of Solomon Burke on the soundtrack.

It also tells us that Pam Grier, who's listed as Pamela Grier, isn't one of the stars but is one of four co-stars, suggesting that she's going to get a heck of a lot more screen time than she does. In truth, the only co-star with a real part is Sam Laws as "Stretch" Finian, who plays a big role in the developing crime and a bigger one in how it all falls apart.

What's particularly telling is that the other three of those co-stars, the ones without a lot of screen time, are all female. Women simply don't have much of a place in this picture and what place they have is decidedly subsidiary. It seems like women in this world are hookers or mistresses, maybe wives to ignore, but not anything of real consequence.

It may be cynical but it seems like Judy Pace landed a star credit not because she had a role of substance but because she'd been in a real blaxploitation pioneer, Cotton Comes to Harlem in 1968. The others probably got their co-star credits for showing their boobs.

This is a man's world, it seems, and it would be nothing without Sidney Lord Jones, a crook with serious style who starts the film in a cell in San Quentin reading up on his next job. He's quickly released and he practically dances his way out of there, man. He's played by Thalmus Rasulala who was very much on the rise, with this his second big screen credit and his first starring role. He'd follow it up by playing the villain in Blacula later the same year.

Jones seems to transcend his enviroment, a black man who believes with every pore of his being that he's important and the world must bend to his will. By comparison, Travis Battle is firmly stuck in his environment, a good man who served honourably in Vietnam but owes a couple of thousand to an illegal bookie and starts the film being chased by the cops for no better reason than he walked round a corner.

He's played by Julian Christopher, going by Jim Watkins, and it's his film debut. He does an impressive job, reminding of a young Denzel Washington. He went on to quite a career but he never became the star he could have been.

If you remember *The Asphalt Jungle*, you'll be waiting for the jewel heist but you need to be patient. We will get there, roughly halfway in, but the script has Jones build everything from the ground up first. The first half is all about putting the job together. The job itself is over pretty quickly, leaving most of the second half taken up with how it all goes horribly wrong.

The key players are Jones, the mastermind, who's figured out how the whole job's going to work before the opening credits are over, but needs a crew, fifty grand up front to pay them and a way to handle the proceeds afterwards; Finian, his gateway to a financier, because of his standing in L.A.'s criminal underworld; and Bill Mercer, the rich black man who agrees to pony up the dough to make the job a go.

They're an interesting trio, because they're very different. Jones is going places and knows it. Mercer is already there, except everything's a front because he's really broke. And Finian's the one getting his hands dirty every day but won't ever be anything but a middleman. He's very aware of his place and he's wary indeed of stepping beyond it.

Battle, of course, ends up as one of the crew and he sees this one job as a way to get out of "Whitey's jungle". He wants to pay off his debt and get out of the city, where he can enjoy the open air and not have to deal with the Man.

It has to be said that the Man is everywhere here even though he rarely bothers to actually show up. The Man is mostly distilled into one racist white character, Lloyd Harmon, who is a police captain in the LAPD. The best scenes to address racial inequity here unfold between him, in the form of a smarmy Stewart Bradley, and his token black officer, Lt. Brian Knowles, portrayed magnificently by Lincoln Kilpatrick, who knows exactly how to work him.

Other crew members include Battle's half-brother John—"same nag, different jockey"—and a safecracker and priest, Rev. Roy Harris, which is an interesting touch. There are many interesting touches here, but I'm not going to run through all the many good lines, moments and scenes, because they'll suggest that this is a far better film than it actually is.

In the end, it's a decent movie, I guess, but it never seems quite right even when it's doing something impressive. It's like Barry Pollack, a debuting director, didn't really understand it, even though he adapted the source novel into a script himself. Critic Roger Greenspan called that out in his *New York Times* review, as well as pointing out that the cast and the story are black but the crew was not, including Pollack, and that may be the most important factor.

You'll have noticed that absolutely nothing I've said involves a single woman, so you may be wondering when Pam Grier shows up. She's a hooker here and she only gets a single scene broken into two. It's a lot more than she got in *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls*, especially as there are lines for her, but it's a lot less than her co-star credit hinted at. She's on screen for about two minutes, selected to satisfy Jones and she isn't happy that he doesn't pay her afterwards.

The first half is darkly lit but she's instantly recognisable because of the shape of her nose and, well, she's far better endowed than the other girls in the picture. The second half is better lit, but she's quickly out of there.

So, back to the Philippines she went.

WOMEN SO HOT WITH DESIRE THEY MELT THE CHAINS THAT ENSLAVE THEM!
Lashed to a terrible machine that maims tender young bodies and cripples innocent young minds.
THE BIG BIRD CAGE
MEN WHO ARE ONLY HALF MEN AND WOMEN WHO ARE MORE THAN ALL WOMAN
METROCOLOR
starring PAM GRIER · ANITRA FORD · CANDICE ROMAN · CAROL SPEED and SID HAIG
produced by Jane Schaffer · written and directed by Jack Hill · A New World Pictures Release
72/2 39
THE BIG BIRD CAGE

THE BIG BIRD CAGE (1972)

DIRECTOR: JACK HILL

WRITER: JACK HILL

STARS: PAM GRIER, ANITRA FORD, CANDICE ROMAN, CAROL SPEED AND SID HAIG

The Big Doll House wasn't a great movie but it was an important movie, a pioneer that kicked a genre into motion. This isn't great either and it's not as important but it's much more fun. It stands up as a great example of why seventies exploitation is often so rewatchable.

Everything points to this being a sequel but it isn't. Sure, it has a deliberately similar title to cash in. Sure, it's another of Roger Corman's films for New World Pictures that was shot in the Philippines and it's women in prison once more. Sure, Jack Hill's back as both writer and director and Pam Grier and Sid Haig, so good as supporting actors in *The Big Doll House*, get the leads this time. But it's unrelated. Unlike *Women in Cages*, it doesn't even re-use the sets.

Some of it is just as formulaic as you might expect. There's a beautiful foreign woman in the Philippines who's quickly incarcerated in a rural establishment packed full of women in skimpy outfits who take a lot of showers and not just because they need them after working hard on the road crew. The commandant's a sadist and, every time something doesn't meet his strict criteria, he doubles down. Of course, that goes way beyond realistic levels and that prompts the inevitable prison break.

So far so typical for the genre. However, Hill switches up a lot of things as well.

For a start, this is a government work camp rather than a prison and that means that it's outside, as we see the moment the film begins, with a bevy of beauties working above stepped rice terraces. It's great scenery, however you'll interpret that. The girls live in dormitory huts and the sun is everywhere, making this quite a bright women in prison movie.

For another thing, the guards are male for a change, but they're all gay, most likely due to Warden Zappa—I kid you not—cementing his villainous status with the viewers by requiring there to be "no fornication with anyone of any kind ever." And that does mean exactly what you fear it might: a women in prison flick with no lesbian action. But hey, Sid Haig does get to pretend be gay for a while and that's a joy.

And there's an actual framing story that we see first. We don't start or end in the camp; it just happens to be a logical means to an end to a bunch of revolutionaries hiding in the hills. After all, most of them are male and they want some female company. Now, where could they find two hundred women somewhere in their immediate vicinity?

We meet the revolutionaries first, in rather memorable fashion. We're in the Flame, a posh restaurant frequented by the beautiful people. Pam Grier's singing on stage and Sid Haig is on guitar, which makes for a priceless scene. Pam can actually sing and, while I'm pretty sure Sid can't play guitar, he does have fun with it. He has even more fun after Pam smashes it and pulls out a machine gun. He grabs a pistol out of a bongo and it's a stick-up! He also throws a

posh chick over his shoulder as a bonus.

Now, the gang drive off without him and his prize, so he throws the driver out of the next taxi to pass and drives away in it, a pair of old customers still in the back seat. When he finds himself cornered by the cops on a bridge, he jumps into a river to get away.

What's important here is that the prize he stole is Terry Rich, who has no problem if he rapes her, because she's been sleeping with a few Filipino ministers and so become a serious embarrassment to the U.S. goverment. That's why they don't step in when she gets blamed for the stick-up she had nothing to do with.

Grier plays Blossom and Haig plays Django and the former emphatically wants the latter to get on with the revolution he keeps talking about. However, he doesn't seem like it's any sort of priority. "Tomorrow we revolution," is his motto. "Tonight we feast!"

Clearly Corman or Hill or whoever checked reactions to *The Big Doll House* noticed just how well the two worked together, so made sure to make that a key component of this film. Their reunion at the revolutionaries' camp is gleeful fun. He arrives back ragged and almost falling out of whatever clothes he has left. She meets the philandering bastard with a knife. He jolts her into the mud. She hauls him in after her. It's perfect stuff, right down to their stilted shack rocking in the next scene.

Frankly, they own this film from the outset and it takes some hard work from a few others to even challenge them. Vic Diaz does best as the most obvious gay guard, Rocco, but Subas Herrero gets some good scenes as a colleague called Moreno. Teda Bracci tries hard to rule the dorms as a butch prisoner, Bull Jones, but Karen McKevic wins out with some outrageous behaviour that answers the question you may be asking yourselves about her early on.

Many of the camp girls look like they stayed on from *The Big Doll House* or *Women in Cages*, but none of them do except for Grier. Sexually frustrated Carla does look like Roberta Collins but she's played by Candice Roman. Similarly, that's McKevic as the remarkably tall girl not Jennifer Gan.

It all comes back to Grier though, because I have no doubt you've figured out how Django and his revolutionaries are going to get those two hundred women. That's right. They'll put Blossom into the camp undercover and set it all up from there.

And so Blossom wanders into town to throw a dud grenade at the governor. "Shucks," she says and off to the camp she goes, just like that. It allows her to fight some girls—some in the mud, some in the refectory—and take over as the new girl in charge, with sass in abandon and all sorts of politically incorrect dialogue. "And it's Miss Nigger to you, OK?"

There is opportunity for more here but I'm not going to complain. The biggest letdown is the Big Bird Cage of the title, which is the mill at which some girls work as a punishment. It looks fantastic, must have cost a lot to build and is the location for one of the best scenes of the film, but could have had far more use.

Still, we get a peach of a role for Haig; Terry being strung up by her hair; everything in the film blown up or burned; lots of karma and a sizeable death count; and Anitra Ford's hair in perfect condition in every scene, even after tumbling down a waterfall.

And we get Pam Grier dominating. *The Big Doll House* suggested at presence. This proved it beyond a shadow of a doubt. No wonder Jack Hill knew who to call to play *Coffy*.

HIT MAN
He aims to please.
MGM presents "HIT MAN" Starring BERNIE CASEY · Co-starring PAMELA GRIER
Screenplay by GEORGE ARMITAGE · Based Upon the Novel "Jack's Return Home" by TED LEWIS
Produced by GENE CORMAN · Directed by GEORGE ARMITAGE
R RESTRICTED
METROCOLOR
MGM

HIT MAN (1972)

DIRECTOR: GEORGE ARMITAGE

WRITER: GEORGE ARMITAGE, BASED ON THE NOVEL 'JACK'S RETURN HOME' BY TED LEWIS

STARS: BERNIE CASEY, PAMELA GRIER, LISA MOORE AND BHETTY WALDRON

In the early seventies, Pam Grier made a lot of films for producer Roger Corman, generally women in prison flicks shot in the Philippines. However, in between them were a pair of films for Roger's elder brother, Gene Corman, which were shot back home in the States.

Notably, both were also blaxploitation takes on hit novels that had already been made into more famous films. *Cool Breeze* was a version of *The Asphalt Jungle*, while *Hit Man* was literally an adaptation of *Get Carter*, even if the writer, George Armitage, didn't know it, because Gene Corman gave him a copy of the script without a title on it, asking for a black equivalent.

Grier gets second billing for a much bigger role than the skimpy one she got in *Cool Breeze* and other actors return too, notably Sam Laws but also Rudy Challenger and Ed Cambridge. In that film she was a hooker, but she's promoted to porn star here. We even get to see a little of one of her character's movies during a pivotal scene. No hardcore, of course, because this is a long way from *Caligula*.

She's one of three co-stars here, all of them playing second fiddle to Bernie Casey, the star of the show as Tyrone Tackett, the hit man of the title. At least I assume he's a hit man. That never seems to be important and it really has no bearing on the story whatsoever. Gozelda does and, while she may or may not have the most screen time, she certainly gives Grier the most to do of any of the three co-stars.

We meet the other two first, as they have a closer personal connection to Cornell Tackett, the MacGuffin of the movie who's dead before it begins and never appears in it. The official verdict is suicide—he supposedly got drunk and drove his car off a cliff—but that doesn't make sense to Tyrone so, after the funeral, he keeps on stirring the pot in good old fashioned style until he finds out whodunit and why.

The first is Irvelle Way, Cornell's main girl, who's a prostitute at Candy Lily's House. She's the one who wired Tyrone about his brother and she's a surprisingly decent character for Bhetty Waldron to play. The other ought to be Rochelle Tackett, in the form of Candy All, but it isn't. Instead, it's Laural Garfoot, who runs a motel that Tyrone checks into and is promptly entangled both with him and his quest. She's a lovely lady played by Lisa Moore, with stellar dialogue—"it sleeps two but parties four," she tells him about his room.

Of course, Casey is styling as Tyrone. He's in a burgundy outfit when he arrives, down to a red hat that's tilted at just the right angle. He's sharply dressed but also sharply alert, enough to know that he's being followed by a pair of cheap hoods who want him to fly right back out of there after the funeral. Why? Well, that can only come down to Cornell's death. And so the plot thickens, as they say.

The biggest problem *Hit Man* has is that the plot *really* thickens. Apart from a couple of sex

scenes, Tyrone really can't stay still for more than a few moments. Every time we blink, he's gone somewhere else. And, as soon as he gets there, he's left again. His mileage is crazy, and the location shifts only increase as the picture runs on.

Some of it's pretty straightforward. Once he visits all the people he knows about and adds Epps' Car City, as that's where Cornell worked with Sherwood Epps, he starts following leads in the bad parts of town to see where they go.

Shag Merriweather has a dog in a dogfight, so we're shown brutal scenes with lots of pink dye. Shag works for Nano Zito, who challenges Tyrone to a handball game. What isn't Zito's is Theotis Oliver's, a porno film dealer. Somehow we learn about Julius Swift, a safari park vet at Africa America, with plenty of big cats in cages and plenty more out of them. Why, we're not sure but he seems to be important.

These are good locations for the most part and it feels like George Armitage knows what he's doing, even though the only film that he'd directed before this was *Private Duty Nurses* for Corman a year earlier and the only one he'd written before that was *Gas-s-s-s*, such a weird mess of a film that he arguably shouldn't have been allowed to write another one.

The problem is that he keeps piling on more details of story that the grand sweep gets hard to follow and he keeps moving us from place to place so quickly that we start to wonder if he's trying to hide something. Would this fall apart if it stood still? Would we see the holes? Is Tyrone sponsored by the mile?

Frankly, we don't care that much. We fairly assume that Cornell didn't commit suicide but we never met the dude and have no dog in the race, unlike Shag Merriweather, who is not an enticing *Austin Powers* superspy.

What we enjoy is how capably acted this is, as indeed were most blaxploitation flicks and Pam Grier, still credited here as Pamela Grier, is the most obvious name to shine down to us today, but she's far from alone when it comes to talent here. Casey is a strong lead who's not afraid to show his butt, and every other black actor in the film, along with a couple of white ones, delivers the goods.

Grier shows up at Zito's place, lounging on the balcony while he hammers all his guests at handball. She has a severe bob hairstyle which makes her look much older, but she reverts to a large afro later on that suits much better.

She gets more to do in that first scene than she did in the whole of *Cool Breeze*, but it's still not a lot. Fortunately, she shows up later on to drive Tyrone around, for quite a while. Hey, if he won't stay still long enough for a scene, get into a car with him and play the scene while he travels around doing whatever he does.

She has quite the story arc as well, which I won't spoil, but it allows her to be free spirited and powerful but also cowed and broken. It's a decent part and she clearly relishes it, all the way to her final, highly unexpected scene, in which it certainly looks like she's doing her own stuntwork. I'd definitely like to find out a lot more about how that was done!

It's certainly a better film for her than *Cool Breeze*, but it was for all the ladies. That was an entirely testosterone-fuelled picture, but this gives plenty of opportunity to Grier, Waldron, Moore and, to a lesser degree, All. While Laws is strong, as are Roger E. Mosley, of *Magnum, P.I.* fame, and Christipher Joy, as a couple of thugs, they're outshone by the women, with a single exception: Bernie Casey, because this is still his film through and through.

CHICKS IN CHAINS
-where they come from this is... FUN!
BLACK MAMA WHITE MAMA
four associates, ltd. presents
an american international release
"BLACK MAMA, WHITE MAMA" · starring margaret markov · pam grier
co-starring sid haig · lynn borden · zaldy zshornack · laurie burton · music composed and conducted by harry betts color by movielab
produced by john ashley and eddie romero · directed by eddie romero · screenplay by h. r. christian · story by joseph viola and jonathan demme
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72/446
"BLACK MAMA, WHITE MAMA"

BLACK MAMA WHITE MAMA (1973)

DIRECTOR: EDDIE ROMERO

WRITER: H. R. CHRISTIAN, FROM A STORY BY JOSEPH VIOLA AND JONATHAN DEMME

STARS: PAM GRIER, MARGARET MARKOV,
SID HAIG, LYNN BORDEN, ZALDY ZSCHORNACK AND LAURIE BURTON

It's back to the Philippines for Pam Grier yet again. However, unlike earlier Filipino movies, this wasn't made by New World Pictures. It's a production of Four Associates, a collaboration between Eddie Romero and John Ashley; if you recall, the former directed the latter in 1972's *The Twilight People*, with Grier only growling as Ayesa, the Panther Woman. Here, she's jointly top-billed with Margaret Markov in a take on 1958's *The Defiant Ones*, with Sidney Poitier and Tony Curtis in a similarly chained chase flick.

Oddly, it starts out like a spaghetti western, for no reason I can determine. We're looking at a Filipino prison, after all, but it's not only the soundtrack, which is highly reminiscent; it's also the shots of Grier and Markov on the Women's Rehabilitation Center bus and those in the fields. It's a strange way to kick off and it doesn't continue in that vein at all, but it's there nonetheless, making little sense.

What does make sense is that we have eyes on these two, because they're the leads from the very beginning. Grier is Lee Daniels, who arrives in a flowing red dress and tries to help another girl who falls on the steps. Markov is Karen Brent, who doesn't care about anything except the revolution she wants to return to.

If there's a third star at this point, it's Lynn Borden as Matron Densmore, who plays up the lesbian angle so common to women in prison movies. She's a butch blonde with severe hair and she sneaks between some walls to spy on the inevitable shower scene, moaning so loud that we're shocked the inmates don't hear her. Warden Logan knows she's in there and waits for her to come out. "Keep it up and you'll go blind!" she tells her.

Apparently the two are an item, but Matron likes to play around. She invites Daniels to her room first, offering her a drink and benefits of cooperation, but Grier, so happily lesbian in a couple of earlier WiP flicks, happily turns her down. Brent, who's next on her list, plays into her ideas in order to make her life easier.

What's different here is that we're not going to stay locked up or long. The pair of them are going to be transferred to a maximum security prison in the city, so they're chained together at the wrist and loaded onto the bus. And you won't be too surprised to find them ambushed. Yes, Brent's revolutionary buddies are here to spring her and it's only the arrival of the army that prompts their retreat. The girls are forced to run the other way and fend for themselves and that's where most of this film lies.

They hate each other, of course. This hasn't got anything do with race, though that makes for an easy contrast too. They're different in a host of ways, each of which add up to wanting to go in a different direction.

Lee has always been poor, so she worked the streets and ended up with a local drug dealer

who she put up with until she could steal $40k from him and run. She has to get to Los Robles at a particular time the next day to spirit that money away on her journey to freedom.

Karen has always been rich, but discovered a conscience and joined the revolution to help free the island. She's fighting for the poor but she must be in San Carlos by tomorrow so that guns can get to the right people or something.

The point is that Los Robles is one way and San Carlos the other and this pair are chained together. What happens next? If you think the girls will put aside their differences, you aren't paying attention. What happens next is what wrestlers would call a Russian chain match!

Inevitably, of course, they're forced to move in the same direction and we're in motion. In the context of this film we'll call them Team A, even though "team" stretches the meaning of the word so acutely that it would be fairer to simply call them the MacGuffin.

Perhaps what makes this film so joyous isn't just that we have Grier and Markov chained at the wrist, it's that there are three other teams simply aching to find them and none of them remotely like each other.

Team B, of course, are Brent's revolutionary brothers, led by Ernesto, who absolutely looks the part in the bearded and camouflaged form of the fabulously named Zaldy Zshornack, one year after *The Hot Box*, also with Markov. These revolutionaries have plenty of men and plenty of guns, but the girls unwittingly avoid them just as much as the other teams, so elongating the chase all the more.

Team C is led by Vic Cheng, drug dealer and Lee's former pimp/boyfriend, who wants that $40k back. He's played by Vic Diaz, last seen as the main gay guard in *The Big Bird Cage*, who is exquisitely calm here, channelling Peter Lorre as an exotic uber-villain. The first time we see him, he's laid back getting a pedicure from a topless chick while another sits next to him on a table and a third is undergoing electro-shock torture to her breasts during questioning. He's definitely not gay here.

That leaves Team D, led by the inestimable Sid Haig, as a cowboy crime boss called Ruben, who listens to country music all the time and dresses like he's ready for a Nashville square dance. He's an absolute riot, stealing scenes in abandon. In one, he has both the police chief and *his* boss drop trow at gunpoint to confirm what his hooker told him about the respective size of their peckers. Oh, but he's not gay here either, even though he pretended at it so well in *The Big Bird Cage*.

The finalé at the waterfront totally delivers, with each team gunning for each other team, as the cops wait in the wings and Lee Daniels tries to get to Leonardo's boat and escape. Oh, and he's Andres Centenera, the warden from *The Big Bird Cage*. There are so many members of that cast in this one. I haven't even got to Ricardo Herrero, the other gay guard in that film, who's also emphatically not gay this time out, given that he tries to rape Karen Brent.

Grier and Markov are both huge fun here. I liked them as inmates but I liked them as nuns even more, in a succession of glorious scenes. It's notable that the hooker is the one who has to employ violence to help their situation, not once but three times before the revolutionary decides that she can help out too.

It helps that their story arcs are believable, and they manage to keep the film theirs even with scene-stealing supporting turns from Vic Diaz and Sid Haig. And that makes this a good one, a better double bill with *The Big Bird Cage* than *The Big Doll House* ever was.

She's the "GODMOTHER" of them all
...The baddest One-Chick Hit-Squad that ever hit town!
"Coffy"
R RESTRICTED Under 17 Requires Accompanying Parent or Adult Guardian
Samuel Z. Arkoff presents an American International Picture
"COFFY"
starring PAM GRIER · BOOKER BRADSHAW · ROBERT DOQUI · WILLIAM ELLIOTT · ALLAN ARBUS as Vitroni · and SID HAIG as Omar
Produced by Robert A. Papazian · Written and Directed by Jack Hill · COLOR by Movielab

COFFY (1973)

DIRECTOR: JACK HILL

WRITER: JACK HILL

STARS: PAM GRIER, BOOKER BRADSHAW,
ROBERT DOQUI, WILLIAM ELLIOTT, ALLAN ARBUS AND SID HAIG

This project is reenforcing just how many fantastic exploitation pictures Pam Grier made in the seventies. It's certainly not all of them, but *Women in Cages*, *The Big Bird Cage* and *Black Mama White Mama* makes three winners out of eight, with *Coffy* a fourth, along with being the first of her classics made back home in the U.S.

I've seen it before, though it's been a while, and, watching in context, it surprised me with its originality. *Cool Breeze* and *Hit Man*, a couple of films I hadn't previously seen, are just what blaxploitation did, nothing original at all. This isn't remotely like either of them.

For a start, Pam Grier doesn't have a small role here, playing something stereotypical like a hooker or a porn star. She's the lead, not just the female lead but the lead who's female, and she's an entirely respectable ER nurse dating a city councilman. That was unusual.

Apparently, AIP lost the rights to *Cleopatra Jones*, which should have pioneered this genre, to Warner Bros., so quickly threw a female-led blaxploitation of their own into production to beat the original to screens, which it did. It's a better film too, which didn't hurt, but it was a pioneer, just like *The Big Doll House* was a mere two years earlier.

For another thing, it doesn't play into any of the usual stereotypes. Black leaders during the blaxploitation era often condemned them for doing exactly that, but it's an anti-drug movie. Coffy spends her days saving lives, but she was unable to save her sister, Lubelle, a young girl now living in a Juvenile Rehabilitation Center attempting to recover from cocaine addiction and failing because her brain's fried.

And that's why our respectable nurse shows up at a funky restaurant as a strung out gift to a drug dealer. She'll do anything for a fix, she suggests, so they head back to his place while the opening credits roll. And, when he turns out the lights, she blows his head off with her sawn off shotgun, then forces an overdose on his pusher. And then she goes back to work.

If that suggests that this is another tough as nails revenge flick with Coffy a tough as nails killer, you'd be missing a key detail. Coffy has the toughness to do whatever it takes and she spends the movie proving that, but every one of these violent acts takes a toll on her. When she gets to work after her first two kills, she's quickly relieved of duty because she's shaking. She suffers from PTSD for most of this film.

She does have a support group, not that any of them know what she's doing. Her boyfriend, Howard Brunswick, is preparing to campaign for a Congress run. He's friends with the chief of police, Ruben Ramos. Lower down the chain of command, her childhood friend Carter is a good cop in a city of bad ones, so much so that he isn't just not in on his partner's dirtiness, he's going to report him for it. That's enough

for two large thugs to break into his house and beat him so hard that he's promptly confined to a hospital bed with brain damage.

And that, of course, just means more targets for Coffy and, as much as this often feels like a drama rather than an exploitation flick, it has no hesitation in getting exploitative. And thus Coffy goes looking for trouble.

The best thing about the film is that she has no trouble finding it. King George is one of the big shots in town, a pimp and drug dealer, and rumour has it that Arturo Vitroni, a mob boss from Las Vegas, may be moving in. Guess who she's gunning for next?

The worst thing about the film is that she's tasked with pretending to be a hooker new in town from Jamaica and, while I enjoyed Grier's acting throughout most of this, especially her sincerity, dedication and attitude but also her vulnerability, none of that extends to her truly abysmal Jamaican accent, which is worse than mine, mon.

And so, while King George, in his outrageous outfit with serious camel toe, can be forgiven for practically drooling while he looks at Coffy lounging by the pool, we have to question his judgement if he buys into that accent.

It's so bad that I was almost thankful when she's rumbled before she can kill one bad guy, crawling along the floor towards him while he spits on her and hurls abuse her way. It means that she can shift back to her regular voice to deliver a pristine "white motherfucker" at him before badass security guard Omar, played by Sid Haig, walks in and punches her out.

That's another departure from the norm. In most blaxploitation movies, the vast majority of characters, including every lead, are black, as you might expect, with a token white dude here and there to represent the Man. This one is certainly more black than white and most of the leads are black, but there are a lot of white actors here too.

Booker Bradshaw is excellent as Brunswick, William Elliott is believably decent as Carter and Robert DoQui has a blast as King George. All those are black, but the white actors go far beyond Sid Haig, who's almost a requirement at this point. Carter's bad partner McHenry is an easy to hate Barry Cahill and Vitroni is, of all people, played by Allan Arbus, who clearly has a blast playing a mob boss.

As fun as it as to watch all of these, it's still Pam Grier's show, from beginning to end, and she dominates the picture, not just through a solid performance but through the situations a knowing script throws her into. Sure, it screws up by making her pretend to be Jamaican, but it gifts her with plenty of other opportunities.

Taking down Sugarman and Grover right at the outset is just a beginning, the effects work as she blows the former's head off startling. I loved the catfights between Mystique, Coffy's Jamaican persona, and her fellow hookers. The most legendary scene there has her put razor blades into her afro to slice open the hands of whichever girl grabs her there. The bedroom assassination attempt scene is a highlight too, as is the chase scene late in the movie.

Coffy's been caught and driven to be given a O.D. under a freeway bridge. She talks her way out of the car, but that just begins an attempt to get away that's far from trivial and a heck of a lot of fun. The finalés are highly satisfying too, both of them.

And so, after three memorable exploitation films out of eight, Pam Grier got her big break in number nine and she nailed it, making this a gamechanger for her and for the genre.

Well, except for that Jamaican accent.

THE BLACK PRINCE OF SHADOWS
STALKS THE EARTH AGAIN!
SAMUEL Z. ARKOFF PRESENTS
SCREAM BLACULA SCREAM
PG PARENTAL GUIDANCE
AN AMERICAN INTERNATIONAL PICTURE STARRING
WILLIAM MARSHALL · DON MITCHELL · PAM GRIER
MICHAEL CONRAD · BERNIE HAMILTON INTRODUCING RICHARD LAWSON COLOR BY MOVIELAB
EXECUTIVE PRODUCER SAMUEL Z. ARKOFF · SCREENPLAY BY JOAN TORRES & RAYMOND KOENIG AND MAURICE JULES
STORY BY JOAN TORRES & RAYMOND KOENIG · PRODUCED BY JOSEPH T. NAAR · DIRECTED BY BOB KELLJAN
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73/211
"SCREAM BLACULA SCREAM"

SCREAM BLACULA SCREAM (1973)

DIRECTOR: BOB KELLJAN

WRITERS: JOAN TORRES & RAYMOND KOENIG AND MAURICE JULES, BASED ON A STORY BY JOAN TORRES & RAYMOND KOENIG

STARS: WILLIAM MARSHALL, DON MITCHELL AND PAM GRIER

After *Coffy*, Pam Grier was *the* kick ass chick in blaxploitation movies and I'm sure that folk wanted to see what she would come up with next. Further kick ass flicks were on the way in *Foxy Brown*, *Sheba, Baby* and *Friday Foster*, but she had two others to knock out before them.

This was the first, a sequel to 1972's *Blacula*, which was exactly what you think it was. I've seen it before and it's better than *Blackenstein* because of the presence of William Marshall as the lead actor. He was tall at 6' 5", elegant and very well-spoken, through his background as a Shakespearean stage actor and opera singer, and he fits very well alongside a select list of his white counterparts in classic horror, Boris Karloff, Vincent Price and Christopher Lee.

He's back for this sequel, reprising his role of Prince Mamuwalde, known as Blacula. Why he could possibly be back is open to debate, as he was a sympathetic monster in the first film and ended it by deliberately walking into the morning sun. He's just as good here, selling a script that deliberately has fun playing up his outdated manners.

"Your bread, man, all of it!" demand a pair of street hoodlums. "Or are we gonna have to become antisocial and kick your ass?"

Utterly unphased and presumably grasping only the threat in the situation, he apologises: "I'm sorry, I don't have any 'bread' on me, and as for 'kicking my ass', I'd strongly suggest you give it careful consideration before trying."

Then he backhands one through a window and slams the other face first into a door. And, after that, he feeds.

This may seem a relatively straightforward vampire movie, but it starts out in voodoo and that's where Pam Grier comes in with promise of delivering much, a promise that sadly isn't fulfilled, though that's hardly her fault.

We're in Los Angeles and Mama Loa, voodoo queen, dies during the opening scene with all her followers gathered around in respect and to see who will be her successor. Willis Daniels believes that it ought to be him, as her son, but she didn't name anyone, so it goes up for a vote and everyone else chooses Lisa Fortier, an apprentice she adopted from the streets. She's supposedly an immensely powerful practioner of voodoo. "Lisa has more natural power than anyone in the last ten years," we're told.

Of course, Willis doesn't take that vote well. Of course, he's a loud-mouthed pain in the ass who insults Lisa and threatens the rest of the group. Of course, he leaps at the first chance he's given to gain power and that's what kicks off the real story here.

Some crazy looking old dude opens a metal box that's been buried in the ground inside a room. Out of the box he pulls a bag and out of the bag he pulls a set of bones, powerful bones to give to Willis to help in his revenge quest

against voodoo priests with too much power. Guess whose bones those might be?

I have to mention here that the ritual is cool and for more than the obvious reason.

Sure, it looks great, with this easily Richard Lawson's best scene in the movie. He's topless but for a necklace of teeth and he recites in French over the ritual circle of candles, before daubing the blood of a sacrificial pigeon onto these powerful bones that he's been given.

However, what I didn't realise until now is that this recitation is what British doom metal band Cathedral used as the opening sample on my favourite song by them, *Voodoo Fire*.

What's telling is that Willis, right there with the bones, believes it's a bust, so wanders off to sit back with a Coors bemoaning his lot, but Lisa feels it from afar. Clearly those followers of Mama Loa picked properly and we're set for an epic battle between Blacula, resurrected by a jealous jackass, and the new Mama Loa. That I was very much ready to see!

The catch is that that's very much not what happens. Sure, those bones are indeed Prince Mamuwalde's and Willis's ritual worked, even if he promptly paid the price for it, becoming the first of Blacula's growing army. Sure, there will be a battle between the vampire and his nemesis, but, perhaps because this was shot before *Coffy*, even though its release date was a month later, that nemesis is not Mama Loa.

Instead, she's a sort of fizzled love interest. She intrigues Blacula and he forbids the vamps he gradually turns from killing her. However, she isn't a replacement for the wife he lost in the first film; she's just a conduit by which he believes he can be exorcised of this evil being that plagues his existence and spirited back to his ancestral homes in Africa.

And, while that still sounds like a fair use of Grier's talents, post-*Coffy*, it really isn't. What it translates to is that her character promises much early but delivers little late. At the point it comes down to battle, she's another damsel in distress and it's embarrassing to see the star of *Coffy* and *Black Mama White Mama* be given such an inconsequential part in the conflict. It isn't her fault and she does her job well. It just isn't the job she should have been given.

Instead, it falls to Justin Carter to serve as a foil for Blacula, which isn't an easy task, given that vampires might be believable out in the European countryside but surely not within the American inner cities, even after Blacula has turned them personally.

Willis is OK with his new status as vampire, for instance, until he realises that he can't see himself in the mirror now. "Aw man, you're jiving!" he pleads to his master.

Carter collects African antiquities and, due to the magic of coincidence, he's showing off a new set of acquisitions at a party at his house, when Blacula wanders in to find that some are from his own neck of the woods, including one necklace previously worn by his wife. He has a polite way of correcting Prof. Walton, Carter's token expert, that feels very right indeed.

Fortunately, once he rumbles what's going on and has to go to the cops with stories about vampires, Carter has the benefit of being an ex-cop himself, so the lieutenant, played by Michael Conrad, of *Hill Street Blues* fame, cuts him some slack, and they pick up the stakes he has for them.

There's a lot of promise here and Marshall is excellent, but it's all wasted. It starts getting cheap in the third act and the finalé is surely the cheapest. No wonder *Blacula III* was never even talked about and Grier got to go on to a much better picture.

BLACK SLAVE
WHITE SLAVE
SEE WILD WOMEN
FIGHT TO THE DEATH!
THE ARENA
TECHNICOLOR
A NEW WORLD PICTURE
STARRING
PAM GRIER
MARGARET MARKOV
WRITTEN BY
JOHN & JOYCE CORRINGTON
PRODUCED BY
MARK DAMON
DIRECTED BY
STEVE CARVER
R
RESTRICTED
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74/17
" THE ARENA "

THE ARENA (1974)

DIRECTOR: STEVE CARVER

WRITERS: JOHN WILLIAM CORRINGTON & JOYCE HOOPER CORRINGTON

STARS: PAM GRIER AND MARGARET MARKOV,
LUCRETIA LOVE, PAUL MULLER, DANIEL VARGAS, MARIE LOUISE, MARY COUNT AND SARA BAY

It shouldn't seem too surprising to find Pam Grier making a peplum flick apparently out of nowhere, given that it's not far off the Filipino women in prison movies she was shooting.

To be fair, part of that is because New World had it re-edited, by Joe Dante, future director of *The Howling*, *Gremlins* and *The 'Burbs*, in order to market it as "Black Slave White Slave", as a way to build on the chemistry of the two leads in an earlier film, Black Mama White Mama. The other star is Margaret Markov.

Originally, however, it was an Italian movie with a third lead, Lucretia Love. I've only seen the beginning of the movie in Italian, showing us the capture by Roman soldiers of not only Bodicia, a druid priestess from Brittany clad in the purest white (Markov), and a lively Nubian dancer called Mamawi (Grier) in a leopard skin leotard, but also Deirdre, some drunken Irish redhead played by a Texan who married a pair of Europeans and died in the Seychelles. So an Italian gladiator movie makes sense, even if her part was whittled down to comic relief.

In either version, the Romans are recruiting slaves and these three, along with Livia, some sort of Roman noblewoman sold into slavery, soon show up on the auction block in Brindisi, back when it was called Brundisium. They're bought en masse by an effete noble who seems very keen to point out that he won't be doing anything with them because he's gay. It seems weird to even point that out but it's important to him, so I guess I'll faithfully report it here.

Initially, this is as gratuitous as we expect it to be, with the usual women in prison shower scene showing bush as well as boobs, because, hey it's European. However, once that's out of the way, this tones down surprisingly much.

They're taken to the arena, not to fight in it but to clean the seating area and pleasure the gladiators. It's traditional, we're told, for any gladiator due to battle to the death tomorrow to have their choice of bed partner tonight.

However, Timarchus, who runs the arena, is finding that his audiences are becoming jaded with the same ol' same ol'. Gruesome death is passé now, and his colleague lost big recently during Spartacus's revolt. "I need something new," he claims, "something really exciting."

No prizes for guessing what that something turns out to be, but it takes a little while to get there. First we have build. The next scene for the girls is to work a debauched Roman party. They arrive inside a golden cage, carried by a quartet of slaves. Mamawi is tasked to dance, while Bodicia serves wine, but it only takes an angry slap on the latter's part to get her raped for being disrespectful.

The girls are strong though, as we find one night when they're chosen by gladiators for a last night of nookie. Quintus is clearly forward with Mamawi, but she stops him and slaps him

before taking control and taking him. Marcus is too busy wallowing in pity to try anything, but Bodicia suggests escape and initiates.

And, eventually, inevitability takes over, as Timarchus and his cohorts try to conjure up a new idea in the sauna. "What about serpents?" "What about elephants?" It takes Livia digging at Mamawi to spark a fight that takes over the entire kitchen and someone to finally connect the dots and arrive at "Return of the Amazon!" and "Barbarian women mad for blood, pitted against each other!"

It's taken half an hour, but we've got there in the end and now there are girls in the arena attempting to lift heavy swords. It's probably fair to say that Markov and Grier immediately look as if they belong in combat, though they take some time to acquit themselves well in an actual fight. They get better as the movie runs on and, once we get to the inevitable escape, they're fantastic. Deirdre, on the other hand, doesn't have a clue and fights drunk instead.

Now, the audience do love that, because it's the something new Timarchus was searching for, but it gets old quickly. It also gets serious. Bodicia vs. Deirdre becomes only a clown act, but Mamawi vs. Lucinia turns deadly.

The scriptwriters, a husband and wife team of John and Joyce Corrington, who had written *The Omega Man*, *Boxcar Bertha* and *Battle for the Planet of the Apes*, knew how to keep us on the hook, especially here. Mamawi is supposed to fight Livia, which we've ached for because the latter is an entitled bitch, but, as a Roman, she has the crowd on her side so is pulled from the bout. That's tough, but the only girl available to substitute is Lucinia, girlfriend of Septimus, chief trainer of gladiators, so it's emotional.

Mamawi wins, of course, because Grier is a star of the film and Mary Count isn't, but she's hesitant to deliver the killing blow, even after Timarchus turns his thumb down. She gets an arrow to the shoulder for her hesitation and it has to be death, if not for Lucinia then for her. So she does the business and we feel it.

The key theme is the old chestnut about the meaning of human. In this world, the Romans are humans and everyone else isn't, hence the Livia saga. As a Roman sold into slavery, she's still human but those taken from their lives to fight to the death as entertainment are not. Of course, the humanity we see is with gladiators, whether it's based in relationships or a code of honour, and a centurion who understands and respects that.

Grier isn't quite as fierce here as I expected as a gladiator but she's strong and vibrant and the fierceness comes when the revolt comes, with her at its head calling the shots. Markov is strong here too, building on her charismatic shared lead in *Black Mama White Mama*. There's not as much character growth for them in this one, but there are other compensating factors.

The Italians, who comprise most of the cast, tend to overact, as does Paul Muller, who was Swiss, but he's very watchable doing it, which is not the case for many lower in the credits. I do like Deirdre and am eager to see watch the full version to see what she does in the eight minutes cut by Joe Dante.

So it's a decent film for the leads, whether we count two or three of them, but otherwise it's a surprise. There's nowhere near as much nudity as I expected and not as much blood. It isn't free of it, but it's no gorefest and it could easily have been, especially with Joe D'Amato shooting the arena scenes. I enjoyed it, but it's a curiosity rather than essential viewing, for everyone involved.

Don't mess aroun' with...
Foxy Brown
She's the meanest chick in town!
She's brown sugar and spice but if you don't treat her nice
she'll put you on ice!
Original Music Score and Songs Performed by WILLIE HUTCH Soundtrack Album available on Motown Records
PAM GRIER as "FOXY BROWN"
R RESTRICTED Under 17 Requires Accompanying Parent or Adult Guardian
Also starring PETER BROWN · TERRY CARTER as Michael · Co-starring KATHRYN LODER · HARRY HOLCOMBE
Produced by BUZZ FEITSHANS · Written and Directed by JACK HILL · COLOR by Movielab · An AMERICAN INTERNATIONAL Picture
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74/100
"FOXY BROWN"

FOXY BROWN (1974)

DIRECTOR: JACK HILL

WRITERS: JACK HILL AND DAVID SHELDON

STARS: PAM GRIER, PETER BROWN, TERRY CARTER, KATHRYN LODER AND HARRY HOLCOMBE

In some ways, *Foxy Brown*, which started life as a sequel to *Coffy* titled *Burn, Coffy, Burn!*, had a bigger impact on film than its predecessor. It's not a better movie and there are a slew of problems if you think even a little about the details, but it kept the things that worked for its target audience and focused them better to provide a film that would resonate with them even more deeply.

The most obvious detail it kept is the kick-ass female lead played by Pam Grier. This was her twelfth film and it feels like she had been building to these movies all the way through. Just as importantly, it kept the fact that she's a good girl, even if we aren't let in on her choice of day job. Coffy was a nurse, a saver of people. Foxy is a little less clear, but she does right by her brother, who doesn't deserve it, and quite a few others, who do. She does what she does to help people, even if it's vigilante justice.

What it firmly ditched was any semblance of guilt about doing those things. Coffy did what she felt she must because of her sister, but she agonised over it afterwards. Foxy's trigger is a boyfriend, who's murdered by drug dealers on her doorstep, but she never looks back. What she does apparently fails to phase her at all. It simplifies the question. And she does it all in a stylish wardrobe, courtesy of Ruthie West, her personal costumer on the film.

Grier, of course, is excellent, because she's believable as the sister, girlfriend, community member who cares, but she's also believable as a lady who will do anything it takes to take the bad guys down. Oddly, it takes a while for her to actually kill anyone in this film, but she gets there, of course, and she's even colder blooded than that, as we find in a gruesome late scene that presages the finalé of *Se7en*. What's in the box, right?

The bad guys are drug dealers again, which was against type for blaxploitation pictures. In this case, however, they're entirely white. The message in *Coffy* that all the important people are corrupt, whether they're white or black, is watered down here so that it becomes decent black folk against criminal white folk.

When a white guy shows up, he's also a bad guy. It's a rule. There aren't many cops here, but the pair in the opening scene completely failing to read the room at a taco stand are just stupid and the pair in a later scene are on the take from the bigshots behind the drug trade. We meet some judges, the collective term for them surely being an orgy, given that they're eager to sample the girls sent over for them in exchange for leniency for dealers in court.

Whenever a black guy is also a bad guy, he's lowest level, a stooge for the white guys above him, like her good-for-nothing brother, Link, played to utter perfection by Antonio Fargas. No wonder they hired him for *Starsky & Hutch* a year later, not that this was close to the only blaxploitation picture in his filmography.

Fargas is delightfully slimy as Link, a dealer who owes his bosses twenty grand for a racket gone wrong and is anxious to find a way back into their good graces. He finds it when Foxy, who's just saved his ass from a beating and is even letting him stay at her place, brings back a new boyfriend who he figures out is actually her old boyfriend.

He was Dalton Ford, an undercover agent at the Bureau of Narcotics who nailed a two year investigation only for the bad guys to buy out the grand jury and shoot him down. Now, with plastic surgery, he's Michael Anderson, and he can start his new life looking like Colonel Tigh in *Battlestar Galactica*, with Terry Carter's face. Maybe it's an upgrade.

Apparently, the changes weren't big enough because Link works it out quickly and rats him out even quicker in exchange for dropping the debt he owes. Now, take a wild stab in the dark at what Foxy thinks of that once she realises!

And so we're off and running. Foxy wants revenge for Dalton/Michael and she'll stop at nothing to get it, starting with landing a gig at the escort service fronting as a model agency that persuades judges and juries to help out a select few drug dealers in court in exchange for a lot of very personal attention.

Anyone following this First Thirty will see a recognisable face in Miss Katherine, the lady behind not just the agency but the whole drug racket in town. The big bad guy, Stevie Elias, is her right hand man. Peter Brown is new and believable in the role for someone primarily known as a good guy, playing officers of the law on TV in westerns like *Lawman* and *Laredo*. She's Kathryn Loder, so memorable as Lucian, the butch lesbian head guard with a torture fetish in *The Big Doll House*.

The other recognisable face here belongs to Sid Haig, because he's almost inevitable at this point in Pam Grier movies, because they were so great opposite each other. He has a smaller role here, as a pilot who flies drugs in for Miss Katherine from Mexico. Foxy needs to seduce him into letting her onto one of those flights and the result is another memorable couple of scenes for Grier and Haig, who has a real habit of stealing every scene he's in. Everyone else lets him. Grier doesn't.

The other scenestealer here is Jeannie Epper who's best known as a stuntwoman, for which she has a Lifetime Achievement Award at the World Stunt Awards. Here, she's Bobbie, who attempts to stop Foxy retrieving a model she's rescued from the syndicate after she stops in at a dyke bar for an unwise drink. She says she has a black belt in karate, so Foxy resorts to using the furniture. "And I got my black belt in barstools!" Epper doesn't get a lot of time here but she sparks a glorious scene that seems a little unusual for the time.

Perhaps more usual, but maybe not, is social commentary about the streets. Sure, some of it is the usual blaxploitation spin, like Link's line about ambition, which is very well delivered but nothing new. I was more surprised to see a focus on a "neighbourhood community" group that's all black but keeping their streets free of drugs. They get their hands plenty dirty by the end, but they're clearly the good guys, just like Foxy is clearly the good guy.

And just in case we want to pass judgement on that, it's covered. "Vigilante justice?" asks Michael Anderson. "It's as American as apple pie," Foxy replies and it's in a purer, simpler form here than in *Coffy*. Maybe that's why it's lasted so well. *Coffy* is the better film but *Foxy Brown* is the better archetype.

BOMBE

HOTTER'N"COFFY"
MEANER'N"FOXY BROWN"
PAM GRIER IS
Sheba, Baby
QUEEN OF THE PRIVATE EYES
Starring AUSTIN STOKER • Special Guest Star D'URVILLE MARTIN as 'Pilot'
Music Composed by MONK HIGGINS & ALEX BROWN • Vocals by BARBARA MASON • Screenplay by WILLIAM GIRDLER
Story by WILLIAM GIRDLER & DAVID SHELDON • Produced by DAVID SHELDON • Directed by WILLIAM GIRDLER
A WILLIAM GIRDLER/DAVID SHELDON PRODUCTION • Color by MOVIELAB • AN AMERICAN INTERNATIONAL PICTURE
PG
PARENTAL
GUIDANCE SUGGESTED
SOME MATERIAL MAY NOT BE SUITABLE FOR PRE-TEENAGERS
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75/15
"SHEBA BABY"

SHEBA, BABY (1975)

DIRECTOR: WILLIAM GIRDLER

WRITERS: WILLIAM GIRDLER AND DAVID SHELDON

STARS: PAM GRIER, AUSTIN STROKER AND D'URVILLE MARTIN

"She's kicking ass and taking names," sings Barbara Mason in the movie's opening theme song. It shouldn't take much to figure out who. "Sheba, baby," that's who. And Sheba, baby is Pam Grier, of course, Sheba Shayne of Racker & Shayne, Private Investigators.

Now, this firm is in Chicago, but she's called quickly back to her home town of Louisville, Kentucky, because her father, Andy Shayne of Shayne Loan Co., is being hassled there. He gives fair deals to customers but his partner Brick isn't confident that they can continue to do that with the mob piling on the pressure.

"They'll kill you," he tells him and wanders off into the night on his own, the exact point we realise that either he's in the mob's pocket or the script needed a lot more work. Given that it's Brick who promptly calls Sheba to fly back to help save the business and keep Andy alive, it should be clear that the script is going to hold this one back.

And, boy does it, with a whole slew of plot conveniences, continuity errors and good old fashioned goofs. Even the sound isn't good and the whole film plays like a cheap knock-off of a bunch of Pam Grier's earlier blaxploitation flicks but with worse dialogue. Even Pam feels a little awkward early on, but she finds herself soon enough and brings some serious power to scenes that show what this could have been in the right hands.

She's needed, even though her dad thinks he can take care of things on his own. He lends her a car and it blows up. So she quits listening to him and starts helping. After all, the police won't provide any protection. So she asks her questions with a gun and gets somewhere.

Rudy Challenger, who had a small role in *Hit Man* and a bigger one in *Cool Breeze*, has a more important one here as Andy, albeit only for a while because Brick's prediction soon comes true. The mob hire a multicultural bunch of thugs to shoot up Shayne Loan with assault rifles. Sheba shoots back and kills three, but Andy catches a stray bullet in the crossfire and dies in hospital. Nobody was supposed to get hurt. So much for outsourcing, huh?

The initial face of the bad guys is D'Urville Martin, a veteran of blaxploitation movies in his first Pam Grier picture. He's Pilot and he's an idiot henchman with a bunch more idiot henchmen. There's a scene that's not meant to be funny where Sheba chases Pilot through a carnival. His goons chase her but he manages to shoot one of them himself. She catches him, of course, and he caves quickly. You want my boss? Here's his number.

Ignoring the boss for the sake of avoiding at least some spoilers, that leaves Austin Stoker as Brick. He would do much better in his next film, John Carpenter's *Assault on Precinct 13* but he's OK here. I think we're supposed to notice charisma between the two stars but we don't. Their scenes boil down to him wanting to find

a better way and her not having the patience for it. She pleads far too much when arguing with him. It's probably to suggest that she's a good girl who can get tough when it's needed, but she's a black P.I. in Chicago. C'mon! She's already tough and she doesn't need anyone or anything to tell her it's suddenly needed.

Watching Grier's films in quick succession is an eye-opener because it's easy to see any film that doesn't fit the flow. This one should, after *Coffy* and *Foxy Brown*, but it feels off. It's like the filmmakers wanted to cash in on those but didn't understand what made them work. It's not enough to hire the same star. They needed a good story too and they didn't have one.

They simply gave her a reason to show up in Louisville and had someone fail to kill her off. She tracks down a snippet of information, not a difficult task for a P.I., and finds a henchman who talks. That puts her on the big boss's boat via the old escort agency chestnut again, right down to the catight. Talk about working to an exact formula!

Oh, and the big boss's boat happens to have more plot conveniences to bring to bear than you can shake a stick at. How many magically convenient speedboats can be moored by one yacht? One fewer than needed is the answer to that question, so prompting Sheba to borrow a magically convenient jetski instead.

Another disappointing aspect is that all the violence Sheba uses here is with guns, except, if I'm not very much mistaken, for one kick. In the wider film, there's some more traditional violence, because Andy gets beaten up and, oh no, once receives an honest to goodness slap! Where's the imagination that went into any of Grier's previous five movies? Didn't she prove herself over and over in those pictures? Give a Chicago P.I. something to do!

I've talked up a lot of negative aspects here and I could try to even that out with positivity but there's not a lot of it to bring up.

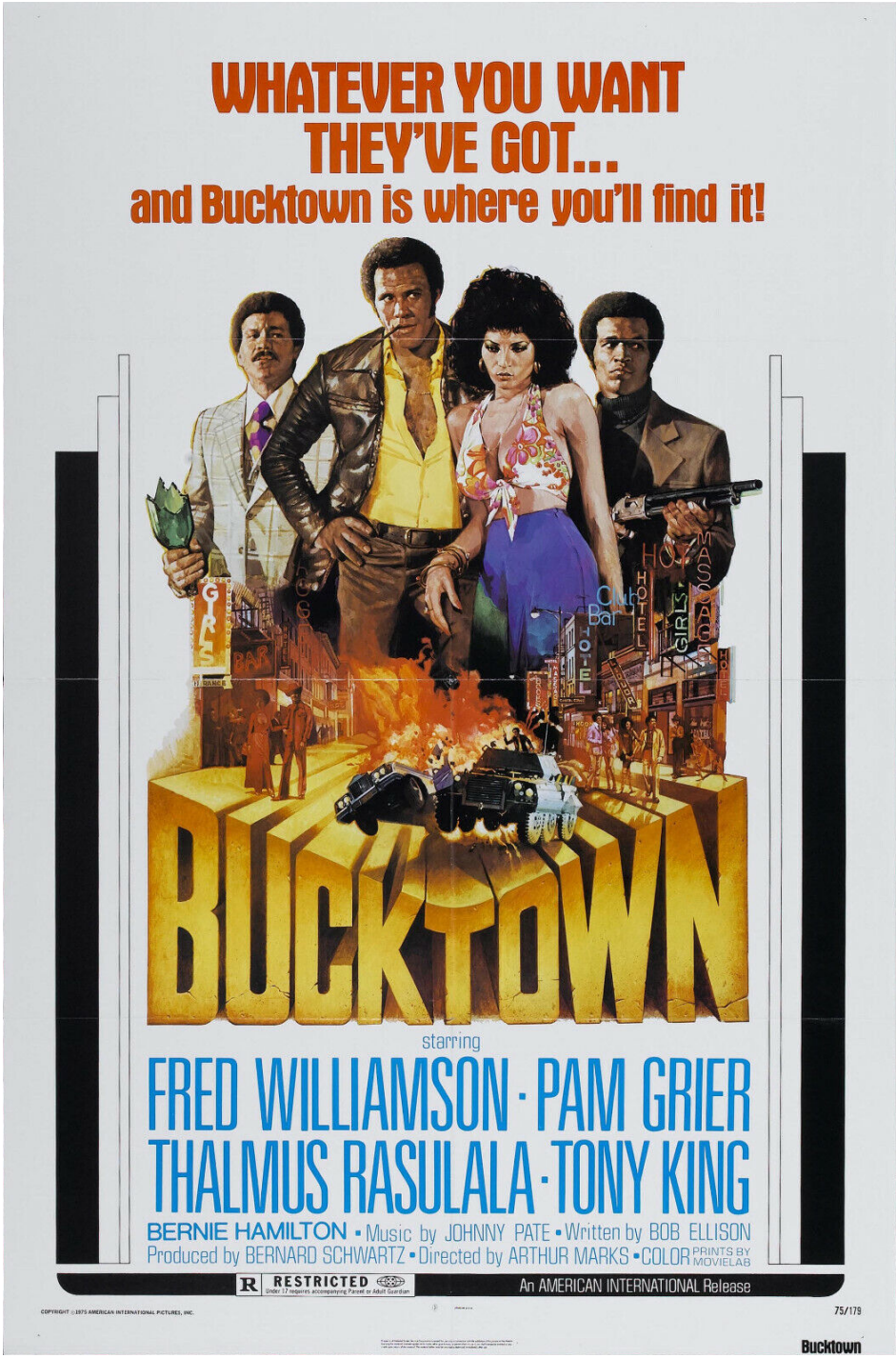
Grier is good, as we might expect her to be, once she gets moving, as if she was waiting to be given something emphatic to do. When she gets it, she rocks, but it's far from immediate. Stoker and Martin aren't bad but the picture restrains them too and they don't overcome it as quickly as Grier does.

Frankly, I only have one favourite scene and it's between Sheba and a character I haven't even mentioned yet, because he's just a piece to a puzzle, a link in a chain and he shouldn't stand out at all, except Christipher Joy nails it and Grier plays along.

Joy plays Walker, who goes by Number One, and he's seriously styling in a truly outrageous blaxploitation outfit. He isn't a pimp though, he's a loan shark (10% interest per week) who runs a travelling pawn shop out of the boot of his car. He knows precisely how to strut but he knows how to run too. And when Sheba gets a gun on him inside his own car, he caves like a little bitch.

I knew many of these blaxploitation icons going into this project, not just Grier, but Joy hadn't registered with me before, even though I'd seen him in his other blaxploitation films, *Cleopatra Jones* and *Darktown Strutters*. He was a fun joke character in both *Cool Breeze* and *Hit Man* and he's even better here in the one good scene that's going to stay with me.

But that's about it. If *Coffy* was the best film Grier had done up until this point, then *Sheba, Baby* surely has to be the worst.


WHATEVER YOU WANT
THEY'VE GOT...
and Bucktown is where you'll find it!
BUCKTOWN
starring
FRED WILLIAMSON · PAM GRIER
THALMUS RASULALA · TONY KING
BERNIE HAMILTON · Music by JOHNNY PATE · Written by BOB ELLISON
Produced by BERNARD SCHWARTZ · Directed by ARTHUR MARKS · COLOR PRINTS BY MOVIELAB
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75/179
Bucktown

BUCKTOWN (1975)

DIRECTOR: ARTHUR MARKS

WRITER: BOB ELLISON

STARS: FRED WILLIAMSON, PAM GRIER, THALMUS RASULALA, TONY KING, BERNIE HAMILTON, ART LUND, MORGAN UPTON, CARL WEATHERS, ROBERT BURTON, JIM BOHAN, GENE SIMMS, BRUCE WATSON AND TIERRE TURNER

Here's an interesting one and I'm watching for two reasons, not just because it's the next in Pam Grier's First Thirty but because it was one of Fred Williamson's two Make It a Double picks, so I'll be covering it soon from his angle.

It's a better pick for him than it is for her, a film that gives him a good introduction then builds him far more than I expected.

It initially feels like an episode of a TV show. Everything kicks right in: the opening credits, the funky music and the action. The very first scene is cops lusting after a hooker, but they rush off to beat up a black guy at the station as a train pulls in.

Getting off that train is Duke Johnson, in Bucktown to bury his brother. And that's the Hammer, who sees the cops but does nothing, just gets a cab to the Club Alabama. "Do you believe in God?" the cabbie asks him. "Then you're in the wrong place."

The club's been closed since Ben died. Duke just wants to sell it and get out of there, but he has sixty days for the estate to close, so others start feeding him ideas. Stay. Reopen the club. What he wasn't expecting to do was stand up to the cops, who are all white and working the local protection racket. But, because he's the Hammer, that's exactly what he does and we settle back for a traditional blaxploitation flick with a good cast.

Thus far, it's all been Williamson's show, but we meet Pam Grier at Ben's funeral. She's his ex, we assume, Aretha by name, and she sees Duke as "just another big city jive ass spook." She's the one who tells him that, while Ben did indeed get found beaten and left for dead, the cops are the ones who did it, thus affecting his decision to hang around. Of course, after she gets angry and he kisses her quiet, it's the cops who interrupt the fun by shooting at his house and telling him to get out of town, so it isn't exactly hard to figure out.

More names promptly arrive after Duke gets on the phone. There's Thalmus Rasulala from *Cool Breeze* and *Blacula*. He owes Duke one and Duke tells him to "bring muscle." Muscle turns out to mean three other dudes, all in suits and ready to be action heroes: Josh, Hambone and TJ. Hambone is notable, because he's played by Carl Weathers, earning his first credit after a brief appearance as a demonstrator in *Magnum Force*. And so they're one side of this war, with the boys in blue on the other. "We're the law," says the chief. "God is on our side." He might even believe that.

Even at this point, it's pretty clear what this movie is. It's obviously blaxploitation and it's obviously about a bunch of big bad black men doing what they must to take Bucktown back from a force of corrupt honky pigs. Right?

Well, right for a while, and we have a heck of a lot of fun watching how it goes down, but what brings this picture real validity is that it isn't content to just tell that story. It also has a second story to tell that follows naturally on from the first.

You see, once Roy and his men do their job and pay off whatever debt he owed Duke, they don't leave. That's how this ends, right, a neat twist on the always white Hollywood western where these saviours of Bucktown ride off into the sunset on the train, full of satisfaction and ready for the next town that needs saving?

Well, not this time. They stay and they don't just open up a club. They take over every one of the rackets the cops were running and milk the town just as efficiently. They just happen to be black instead of white. In fact, the black mayor tells Duke that it's ten times worse than before. So what's he going to do about it?

I can totally see why Fred chose this for his Make It a Double. It's not remotely subtle but it has a lot to say and it flips the formula. Just as we sit back, knowing exactly what this is, it becomes something else, something that we're not expecting. And, from initially wanting to simply get out of town, Duke has to choose his path carefully, decide whether he wants to be a real hero or not.

It's less of a substantial role for Pam Grier. It isn't a bad part, but it's firmly a support role at a point where she was playing leads and doing the job really well. What makes it important is that she's constantly of two minds and she has to bring both to life through good acting.

Some of the time she's strong, even though it's mostly through being confident and angry and pushing for change. However, she doesn't take part in the actual change herself, unlike a string of her recent lead characters. She does have the balls to talk to some very bad dudes the way they deserve to be talked to and that's a lot more than anyone else was doing before Duke arrived, but that's it.

Much of the time she's weak, cowering back when the violence happens, like she's a damsel in distress. That's weird to see after a run of *The Arena*, *Foxy Brown* and *Sheba, Baby*, in which she didn't cower back from anything. If I'd watched this in isolation, not knowing who she was or what else she'd done, maybe I could have bought into that. But I didn't and I do so it doesn't ring remotely true. It feels like she's just a girl and this is a man's film, right down to the cigar that never leaves Duke's mouth, even though he never actually lights it.

It's the only angle that spoils this for me, as it's otherwise much better than I expected it to be going in. I like Williamson, Rasulala and Grier and they're all good here, with Weathers a welcome bonus. There's also opportunity for character actors to flesh out Bucktown too.

Bernie Hamilton gets an excellent part as Harley, a tough guy who's got old but still has some moves left. Tierre Turner gets a strong opportunity too as a street hustler of a kid by the name of Stevie. I never could figure out if he was supposed to be Ben's, Aretha's or both, but he's a lot of fun any which way, building on his pivotal role as Earl in *Cornbread, Earl and Me*. And there's Art Lund, as the police chief as the story begins, who brings some gravitas to a seriously slack collection of boys in blue.

I liked this a lot, but I'm interested to see if I'll like it as much a second time through when I know what's going to happen. A first viewing certainly benefitted from the surprises, but I have a feeling that a second might play just as well anyway.

WHAM! BAM! HERE COMES PAM!
COLT HAWKINS
Friday's main man and personal private eye.
BLAKE TARR
A billionaire with a brain. Friday couldn't resist him.
MADAME RENA
tried to warn Friday and got a knife in the back.
FANCY
took a fancy to Friday but his hustle had no muscle!
FORD MALOTTE
His yen was for men — not for Friday Foster!
Pam Grier
in
Friday Foster
Yaphet Kotto
An American International Release
also co-starring
Godfrey Cambridge · Thalmus Rasulala · Ted Lange with Eartha Kitt
as Madame Rena
Music Score by LUCHI de JESUS · Screenplay by ORVILLE HAMPTON · Story by ARTHUR MARKS
Produced and Directed by ARTHUR MARKS · Color by Movielab · Production Services by HAMPTON ASSOCIATES — 1975
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76/3
"FRIDAY FOSTER"

FRIDAY FOSTER (1975)

DIRECTOR: ARTHUR MARKS

WRITER: ORVILLE H. HAMPTON, BASED ON A STORY BY ARTHUR MARKS, BASED IN TURN ON THE COMIC STRIP CHARACTER CREATED BY JIM LAWRENCE

STARS: PAM GRIER, YAPHET KOTTO, GODFREY CAMBRIDGE, THALMUS RASULULA, EARTHA KITT AND JIM BACKUPS

This might look like yet another Pam Grier-led kick ass blaxploitation flick, but it's a little different from *Coffy* and *Foxy Brown* and all the copycats that sprang up in their wake. In fact, it doesn't feel like a black movie at all, even if most of its cast happen to be black. If casting had gone for white actors instead, it wouldn't feel fundamentally different and that couldn't be said for any of Grier's earlier blaxploitation pictures. They all felt black, not colourblind.

Initially, this one feels like it's a newspaper story with a plucky young photographer (who used to be a model) taking on a big story. It's a throwback to Torchy Blane in the thirties, but with a black actress in the lead.

She's Friday Foster, of course, and she works for *Glance*, "the picture magazine". Her boss, Monk Riley, in the form of Julius Harris from *Live and Let Die*, calls her on New Year's Eve to handle a big job because he can't reach his star reporter, Shawn North, and Blake Tarr is back in town and that's a big deal because he's the "black Howard Hughes".

So, she'll have to do the job. Get down to the airport, shoot your pictures, get out. He's very careful with instructions. Don't. Get. Involved. What he doesn't expect is for Carl Weathers and his buddies to attempt an assassination as Tarr gets off his private plane and Friday to be right in the middle of it, snapping pictures like there's no tomorrow. What she doesn't expect is to recognise Weathers when the photos are developed. This is journalistic gold.

Now, while she doesn't realise yet why she recognises him (and, no, this isn't a sequel to *Bucktown*, even if all three of these actors were in that movie earlier the same year), we know because the moment Friday got off the phone with her boss, her friend Cloris Boston rang to ask for help. It's a matter of life and death, she says, but Foster's off to the airport. When she calls from the darkroom the next day, Cloris has changed her tune. Don't come over, she reiterates. Take a wild stab as to why.

Unlike Coffy, Foxy Brown, Sheba Shayne et al, Friday Foster isn't an original character who was created for this film. This is a comic strip movie, of all things, based on a character who appeared in newspapers that were part of the *Chicago Tribune* syndicate. She debuted in 1970 and ran to 1974, so was done at this point in time. She wasn't the first African American character to have her own comic strip, but she was one of them and she had a massive reach.

While *Friday Foster* was a soap opera strip in which an assistant photographer/supermodel travels to exotic places, this adaptation throws her into something more because it gradually shifts from that plucky newspaper yarn into a fully fledged seventies thriller.

And that's how it proceeds, with all the best and worst aspects of the movie tying to a very complex plot. Initially, the question everyone is asking is "Who?" Who tried to murder Blake Tarr in cold blood? Sure, we know it was Carl Weathers, playing Cloris's boyfriend Yarbro, a far more prominent role than the one he had in *Bucktown*, but who else is he?

That question takes up much of the picture, with Friday following the story to the fashion show by Madame Rena that she happens to be photographing, to Cloris's funeral—like you're not expecting that—and eventually all the way to Washington, DC to mix it up with senators and preachers and whoever else.

Eventually, of course, we start to wonder if there's a more important question that should be asked, namely "Why?" And that's when the film deepens far more effectively than by just confusing us for an hour with delicate strands of plot whisking this way and that for Friday to clutch at.

It's an interesting role for Pam Grier. She's a go getter but in a very different way to usual. She has pluck and moxie and all the other out of date terms to describe the journalists of the thirties who led so many Hollywood movies. However, she's also a more grown up version of those characters who were inherently held back by the Production Code. She has a habit of sleeping with suspects that parallels James Bond, for a start, but it's still always about her, even if her bed partners happen to be senators or billionaires.

Once the plucky journalist becomes the lead in a thriller, she gains a sidekick in the capable form of Yaphet Kotto, as Colt Hawkins, such a glorious detective name. He was born for this sort of role, whether as sidekick or lead, but he had a far more varied career in blaxploitation. He'd be back for Grier's next film, *Drum*, and a TV movie down the road, *Badge of the Assassin*.

Other notables include Thalmus Rasulala for the third time, after *Cool Breeze* and *Bucktown*, as the very confident billionaire, Blake Tarr; a return for Tierre Turner from *Bucktown* as her younger brother; and a host of others in tasty character acting spots.

Eartha Kitt plays Madame Rena delightfully as a haughty fashion designer who knows she can get away with anything; her show is called *The Four Seasons of Sex*. Godfrey Cambridge has an absolute blast as Ford Malotte, living it up in a gay bar in DC surrounded by muscle men in maid outfits. He plays Malotte rather like a black Tim Curry, who had debuted in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* a mere four months earlier. Best of all is Scatman Crothers, as Revd. Noble Franklin, who isn't very noble at all, merely a dirty old man in a priest's outfit who invites Friday to his "retreat" called Jericho.

I liked this film but, unlike almost any other movie ever, I wanted less detail in the plot and more showcase for the characters. What loses us is how convoluted it all is, so complex that we lose the ability to care. What keeps us is an abundance of moments, like Cloris's death on the runway or the most seventies black man in the history of cinema attempting to run Friday over but driving into a transformer instead.

I'll also highlight the music. The score is by Luchi de Jesus, who I believe started as Louis de Jesus and was on the A&R staff at Mercury Records a decade prior before moving into TV and film work. She composed the scores for *Slaughter*, *Lady Cocoa* and *Black Belt Jones*, and delivered a highly ominous thriller score here with a funky blaxploitation twist.

This could have started a series but lost its way and ended up as just a fun standalone.

"MANDINGO" LIT THE FUSE–
"DRUM" IS THE EXPLOSION!
DRUM
It scalds. It shocks. It whips. It bleeds. It lusts.
It out-Mandingos Mandingo!
"DRUM" starring WARREN OATES · ISELA VEGA · KEN NORTON
PAM GRIER · YAPHET KOTTO · JOHN COLICOS
co-starring FIONA LEWIS · PAULA KELLY · BRENDA SYKES as CALINDA
Produced by RALPH B. SERPE · Directed by STEVE CARVER · Screenplay by NORMAN WEXLER
Based on the novel by KYLE ONSTOTT · Music Composed by CHARLIE SMALLS
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United Artists
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76/178

DRUM (1976)

DIRECTOR: STEVE CARVER

WRITER: NORMAN WEXLER, BASED ON THE NOVEL BY KYLE ONSTOTT

STARS: WARREN OATES, ISELA VEGA, KEN NORTON, PAMELA GRIER, YAPHET KOTTO, JOHN COLICOS AND BRENDA SYKES

Friday Foster was Pam Grier's fifteenth film, so I'm halfway into her First Thirty. It was also the end of her traditional exploitation output, the women in prison and blaxploitation flicks that made her such a cult figure. *Drum* is still an exploitation movie, even though it was a major studio film, and it's still black focused, but it's a very different picture.

It's the lesser known sequel to *Mandingo*, an immensely successful novel written by Kyle Onstott in 1957 that became a play and then a film, with James Mason and Susan George. The book sold five million copies in the U.S. alone and spawned fourteen sequels, starting with *Drum*. The movie only spawned this one.

These are stories of the antebellum south, if we want to bowdlerise things. We should call them stories of sadistic slaveowners, because Onstott was inspired not only by the stories he grew up hearing, "bizarre legends" about slave breeding and abuse, but by research done by his adopted anthropologist son in Africa.

While we end up in the central location for the series, the Falconhurst plantation owned by Hammond Maxwell, it's not where we start and he's actually the nicest of the slaveowners we meet. Then again, there wasn't much of a bar to top. He's still a slaveowner with a crude nature, a bedwench and a willingness to whip and castrate and more.

But we start out in Havana, the heart of the slave trade, and quickly shift to New Orleans. Dona Marianna lived in the former but fell in love with a slave, Tempura, a king in his own land back in Africa. That got him strung up but she was pregnant and left for the latter to run a brothel in which her son, Drum, who's unaware that she's his mother, becomes the bartender. It's fifteen years on from *Mandingo* and Drum is twenty years old.

So far, so good. Enter Bernard DeMarigny, a quintessentially loathsome villain. I doubt any of us can say that we like Maxwell but we want to see DeMarigny get his comeuppance in the most karmic way possible and we want it five seconds after meeting the man.

He's invited thirty friends to witness a fight at the brothel but his fighter didn't show, so he's about to lose face. Having already shown us that he has the hots for Drum, he explains to Marianna that he'll withdraw all his custom and that of his friends and have the city shut her down unless... Drum fights Blaise.

Now, I'm happy to see Drum fight Blaise, as Drum is played by Ken Norton, a noted boxer who hadn't won a world championship yet but had broken Muhammad Ali's jaw in an upset win; and Blaise is Yaphet Kotto, fresh from his role as Pam Grier's sidekick in *Friday Foster*. It's a bloody battle but Drum emerges the winner. He gets Blaise as a gift and a woman of his own as a prize. Guess who shows up to join them?

DeMarigny is played by John Colicos, much more sadistic here than in *Battlestar Galactica*. He's a vicious bastard from the outset, lusting after Drum but hurling out the N word like it's confetti. Drum doesn't only reject him, he hits him too and that makes him a deadly enemy. Next thing we know, he springs a knife fighter on him and it's only Marianne selling her son to Maxwell that saves his life.

And so it goes, but it feels draining rather than entertaining. Outrageously awful things happened in every one of Pam Grier's women in prison flicks, but I was entertained because, while there was a very real grounding to those films, they were flights of fancy and the girls tended to get their revenge at the end. Here, it plays far more realistically, with all the sadism a sad reality and, even though we're supposed to feel relieved by the finalé, I never did.

There's not a lot of entertainment on offer here. There's degradation, whether deliberate by ruthless slaveowners like DeMarigny or the infamous Zeke Montgomery or casual by the likes of Maxwell. There's abundant crudity in the ruling classes. There's a base irony in them seeing themselves as superior when it's clear to everybody that they're just slime. Beyond a few fight scenes, I only really appreciated the end of DeMarigny. Had I not had a reason to keep watching, that would have been it.

You might be wondering where Pam Grier is in this film all about Ken Norton being sold to Warren Oates, a wonderful actor who does an excellent job here, with Yaphet Kotto a bonus to the purchase. Well, Grier plays Regine, who Hammond buys on the same morning he buys Drum and Blaise. She's his new bedwench, an object of contention for Augusta Chauvel, who he's also just hired to raise his daughter.

There are many problems here for me, but the crucial one at this point is that Regine is a far less interesting character than any of the other women in the film and none of them are as interesting as the men.

There's depth to Marianna's relationship to Drum, even if she wastes it. There's depth to Augusta's golddigging nature; while she was hired to be a governess, she has firm sights on becoming Mrs. Hammond Maxwell from the very outset and she's not going to let anything or anyone stand in her way.

There's a little depth to Lucretia Borgia, the only actor/character combination to continue on from *Mandingo*—three actors returned, Ken Norton being one of them, but only Lillian Hayman played the same role; and Hammond Maxwell continued but in new hands, Oates a replacement for Perry King.

And there's character, if surely not depth, to Sophie, Hammond's daughter, in the form of Rainbeaux Smith, who's excellent and yet also thoroughly annoying as a spoiled brat who has every intention of sleeping with all the slaves and, if they don't go for it, she'll tell her daddy that they tried to rape her.

Regine, on the other hand, is more of a prop than a character. She's there for Hammond to pleasure himself with and for Augusta to rage against and that's about it. Sure, this was a big budget production made by Dino de Laurentiis and distributed by United Artists, but it wasn't a particularly good role to segue Grier into a more serious film career. She does fine but it's hardly a challenge for her. She could do this in her sleep and may well have done so.

Let's hope that her next film had something more substantial for her to throw her talents at. Spoiler: it didn't.

CARLO PONTI presenta
ANTHONY STEEL ANNIE BELLE
PAM GRIER
in
LA NOTTE DELL'ALTA MAREA
con HUGO PRATT · GIACOMO ROSSI STUART · ALAIN MONTPETIT e con GERARDO AMATO
regia di LUIGI SCATTINI · fotografia di BENITO FRATTARI · musiche di PIERO UMILIANI · produttore associato MARIA JOSÉ RAYMOND
UNA CO-PRODUZIONE ITALO-CANADESE CHAMPION CINEMATOGRAFICA
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Grafopress - Ciampino - Roma
Anno di edizione MCMLXXVII

TWILIGHT OF LOVE (1977)

DIRECTOR: LUIGI SCATTINI

WRITERS: LUIGI SCATTINI, VITTORIO SCHIRALDI, GIACOMO ROSSI STUART AND CLAUDE FOURNIER, FROM A STORY BY LUIGI SCATTINI, FREELY BASED ON THE NOVEL "IL CORPO" BY ALFREDO TODISCO

STARS: ANTHONY STEEL, ANNIE BELLE, PAMELA GRIER, HUGO PRATT, GIACOMO ROSSI STUART, ALAIN MONTPETIT AND GERARDO AMATO

Completely unrelated to the Filipino horror movie, *The Twilight People*, released five years earlier, this Italian production is unrelated to anything else in Pam Grier's filmography too.

In fact, that seems to be much of the point, as the first half of her First Thirty movies was taken up by variations on a theme, a bunch of exploitation movies, especially the women in prison and blaxploitation flicks that made her famous; but the second half is a constant flow of fresh changes, every film being completely unlike the next.

And this one, as far as I can tell, is different from all of them, because it's a very European "affair" movie. IMDb suggests that it's drama and romance but the drama is forced and the romance is, well, not very romantic.

At least, as far as I can tell, which is a caveat I have to throw out here because the one and only copy of this film I could find is in Italian, which I don't speak, and there are no subtitles to be found, even in the fan communities that exist for this sort of thing.

Thus I have little idea of what's truly going on and everything I say here is shaped by my assumptions, which could well be faulty. Then again, this is an Italian film so it's highly visual in outlook and, if it's doing its job, it ought to be universally understandable, even to those of us who don't know the language.

And hey, it's inherently international, as an Italian film starring an Englishman, Anthony Steel (who was best known for his marriage to a Swede, Anita Ekberg); and a Frenchwoman, Annie Belle. It's set primarily in Canada and eventually in the Caribbean. Oh, and I'm only watching because of an American in the cast.

Oddly, it begins in English, because Timmy Thomas sings the theme tune, which explains the original Italian title: "The night of the high tide. It's where love begins."

Maybe it does and maybe it does, by the end of the movie, but mostly about sex, opening with a naked young lady bouncing on top of a handsome but quite clearly older man, even if his silver hair lends him a distinguished air. He's Richard Butler. She doesn't matter.

Anthony Steel was a British actor and singer who tended to play quintessential Englishmen of bygone eras, though he found a later career in Italy where the size of his roles decreased in time, in part because of a growing addiction to alcohol. Butler was one of his last leads.

Oddly, we're not in Italy. His commute is on roads with very American roadsigns and we're apparently north of the border in Montreal, a city with two official languages, neither being Italian. So, naturally all the dialogue is Italian, with an occasional phrase in English sneaking in to hint to us what's actually going on.

The first words I caught were "blue jeans", because Butler is the director of an advertising agency and he's searching for the perfect ass to model someone's jeans. Photographers take pictures of a slew of naked butts so he can look at them all in close-up on a projector screen. "A touch of class" is the label they'll overlay.

Other English words I caught were "unisex", "black magic" and "voodoo", while others are easy to understand even without translation, such as "magnifique" and "exotico".

However, they don't really mean anything. What's important is that Butler sees a lady in a sauna and finds himself immediately obsessed with her. There are lots of naked people in this sauna, both male and female, though some of them are covered by towels or robes. Nudity is not skimped on here. But she is striking.

She's Dyanne and she's much younger than he is. Steel was born in 1920, so was 57 at this point in time, while Annie Belle was born in 1956, making her perhaps 21 and him almost three times her age, even though her hair is as silver as his. Naturally, this is supposedly a romance between the two, though it seems to me that it's a relatively one-sided romance.

In fact, it gets uncomfortable pretty quickly. We might say that he's rather forward, going to her apartment and drenching her in kisses while she tries to talk on the phone and trying to unzip her jeans. We might, however, call it sexual harassment, even if she thinks "don't run away" when a man walks in and jumps on her bed. Does she have a boyfriend? I think so.

Belle had already become a important name in exploitation cinema, having started out in Jean Rollin films like *Bacchanalles Sexuelles* and *Lips of Blood*, but progressed to *Laure* and *Black Emmanuelle, White Emmanuelle*. She would find her biggest roles at the turn of the decade, in the horror movies *The House on the Edge of the Park* and *Absurd*, so this a stepping stone.

Their "romance" ends very quickly. He gets on top of her, she slaps him and he slaps her back. He walks out and she doesn't look happy. After that, things happen, Butler womanises a series of women, some on a casting couch, and we wonder when Pam Grier will show up.

She shows up fifty minutes in, dancing at a party on the Caribbean island of Martinique. She's in her element and clearly happy. Grier is "nel ruolo di Sandra" in the opening credits but I'm not sure that she's named in the film.

And why she's important we have little idea. We know that Butler has persuaded Dyanne to fly to Martinique to be the face of a perfume ad and everything important focuses on them. I can only assume that Sandra is either there to serve as a backup in case Dyanne doesn't work out or perhaps as added background to the imagery.

As such, it seems appropriate that she often looks like she's a model and screenshots seem to be double spreads from a fashion magazine. She looks great, of course, and she spends the majority of her screen time wearing a skimpy blue bikini because they shoot on a small and deserted island and find themselves stranded there for a few days.

However, what's the point? As decorative as she is, she's nothing else and that's a waste of serious acting talent. She is given dialogue but she's dubbed by an Italian actress, just as Steel and Belle presumably were, and none of it has any importance anyway. Quite frankly, I'd say that her absence from the picture would have made any difference whatsoever to the story.

But hey, it might make more sense if I could speak Italian!

In 1950, somebody had the crazy notion to put Wendell Scott,
a black taxi driver-bootlegger, on a racetrack and...
he drove 'em wild!
NOBLE
RICHARD PRYOR
moves faster than...
GREASED LIGHTNING
RICHARD PRYOR
BEAU BRIDGES · PAM GRIER · CLEAVON LITTLE
in "GREASED LIGHTNING"
Co-Starring VINCENT GARDENIA · RICHIE HAVENS
Produced by HANNAH WEINSTEIN • Written by KENNETH VOSE & LAWRENCE Du KORE and MELVIN VAN PEEBLES and LEON CAPETANOS • Executive Producer RICHARD BELL
• Music by FRED KARLIN • Songs Performed by ROBERTA FLACK and RICHIE HAVENS • Color by MOVIELAB • PRINTS by TECHNICOLOR ® • Directed by MICHAEL SCHULTZ
A THIRD WORLD CINEMA PRODUCTIONS FILM • DISTRIBUTED BY WARNER BROS. A WARNER COMMUNICATIONS COMPANY
PG
77/135

GREASED LIGHTNING (1977)

DIRECTOR: MICHAEL SCHULTZ

WRITERS: KENNETH VOSE & LAWRENCE DUKORE AND MELVIN VAN PEEBLES AND LEON CAPETANOS

STARS: RICHARD PRYOR, BEAU BRIDGES, PAM GRIER, CLEAVON LITTLE, VINCENT GARDENIA, RICHIE HAVENS AND JULIAN BOND

Continuing her shift away from exploitation pictures, here's something that's a biopic just a little before it's an action movie, albeit still with a focus on African Americans in America.

The subject is Wendell Scott, who became a stock car driver at a time when NASCAR was whites only. He drove in the Dixie Circuit, as the token black driver to draw black fans, with prejudiced drivers deliberately wrecking him as often as they could. He went on to become the first black driver to race and win at every level in NASCAR, eventually doing the same as a team owner.

He had a fascinating and action-filled life, a description that's both accurate and too happy to gloss over the fact that much of that action was due to systematic racial discrimination. It was an obvious candidate to adapt to the big screen and the studio that did so was Warner Bros., who cast comedian Richard Pryor as the lead and tellingly gifted the project to a black director, Michael Schultz, and a set of writers who included Melvin van Peebles, who had set the blaxploitation genre into motion with his indie film *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* six years earlier.

As tended to be the case with Hollywood, it turns out to be a loose adaptation of the truth, but not to play down the racial aspects, only to simplify them a little. And, while this is tame for Pryor, whose comedy routines were highly adult, it starts out as it means to go on with a boy who's born to race. The first thing we see is a bunch of white kids challenging him to a bicycle race in the street. He wins and he does it by jumping some sort of roadwork that the rest don't dare try. "You're one crazy nigger," says the leader of the white kids. I think it's a form of respect.

Fast forward and he's grown into Pryor who returns to Danville, Virginia from the Second World War. His friends are waiting at his home to party, including two very recognisable faces in Cleavon Little and Pam Grier. The former is his best friend Peewee and the latter becomes his girlfriend, Mary Jones.

We skip along like, well, greased lightning, a set of key moments putting wheels in motion. Wendell's planning to open a garage but tells Mary's dad that he wanted to be a champion race car driver. He laughs but Wendell doesn't.

Blink! He's a taxi driver who tears around a race track in his checkered cab. Blink! They're married. Blink! The little he makes as a cabbie goes it into a jar for the garage. Blink! Mary's pregnant. Blink!

There's a great scene here in which Wendell chases after a bootlegger, even though he still has a fare in the cab, and effectively gives his job interview at high speed. Turns out Peewee works for them already, so he has an in. He's very nervous around rednecks with shotguns,

but that's understandable. However, while the cops interrupt the operation, he gets $65 out of it. That's a heck of a lot more than the $2.75 he earned from a full day driving a cab.

Suddenly, we're in *The Dukes of Hazzard*. The cash adds up, but the cops haven't caught him in, blink!, three years of trying. They've killed a bunch of vehicles but only nabbed a handful of bootleg whiskey bottles. Blink! Five years in and the Scotts have two kids.

It's when they finally catch him that things truly kick off. Sheriff Cotton's over the moon but Billy Joe Byrnes gives Wendell an offer he can't refuse: race on his speedway and Cotton will drop most of the charges. All he has to do is make it round six laps of the track.

The fact that white drivers literally bounce him off that track doesn't help his odds but he drives back on again and crosses the line. He's not a race car driver, not really—he's just bait—but the experience underlines why he feels that he has to make it and he gradually builds himself a team.

He finds a mechanic in Woodrow, played by Richie Havens. He finds a white driver friend in Hutch, played by Beau Bridges. And he has enough support built in the crowd to persuade officials who overtly cheat him out of a major win because of his colour into settling it, even if it's quietly after everyone's gone home.

And so we go. The spirit of the truth is here if not many of the particular details of it and we get to watch Wendell's gradual rise. It's an oddly lighthearted film, though, for something so clearly about race, even the specific scenes that go there, like when he wins a steak dinner for two at a "whites only" restaurant, but goes anyway with Hutch.

Frankly, these scenes are lot better than the ones we see on the track. He builds a rivalry with Beau Welles, and drives plenty of laps in the final race with a wheel that's threatening to fall off because he left the pits too quickly. These scenes are clichéd and forgettable.

It's not a bad film for Richard Pryor, who is appropriately the focus for almost all of it. He doesn't have to try particularly hard, because the dramatic scenes aren't that taxing and he could handle lighthearted comedy in his sleep, so it's a relatively effortless win for him.

His other win is that he met Pam Grier and they hit it off enough to start dating. It didn't work out for a number of reasons, not least his cocaine adiction, but she helped teach him to read, given that he only reached the eighth grade after a traumatic childhood; he grew up in his grandma's brothel, where his alcoholic mother worked before abandoning him at ten. He was sexually abused at seven and expelled from school at fourteen.

Sadly, this isn't a great film for Grier, as it's short on opportunities for her to shine. She's perfectly fine and she gets to age considerably because the story spans over two decades, but most of the important things that she does are back home with the kids while we're watching him race, so all those opportunities go to him instead of her. Cleavon Little is underused too, though Bridges and Havens do get some good scenes here and there.

Opportunity may have been Grier's biggest problem at this point, not so much because of her colour but because of her gender. Women, especially black women, have it notably tough in Hollywood. This was a major studio picture, though, so she was moving her career in the right direction, even if they weren't yet giving her the leads she deserved.

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15 Minutes From Manhattan There's A Place Where Even The Cops Fear To Tread.
PAUL NEWMAN in
FORT APACHE, THE BRONX
The Cops Last Stand.
TIME-LIFE FILMS PRESENTS A DAVID SUSSKIND PRODUCTION
PAUL NEWMAN in
FORT APACHE, THE BRONX
Starring EDWARD ASNER KEN WAHL RACHEL TICOTIN
DANNY AIELLO PAM GRIER and KATHLEEN BELLER Music by JONATHAN TUNICK
Produced by MARTIN RICHARDS and GILL CHAMPION Written by HEYWOOD GOULD
Directed by DANIEL PETRIE Executive Producer DAVID SUSSKIND
TIME-LIFE FILMS
FORT APACHE, THE BRONX

FORT APACHE, THE BRONX (1981)

DIRECTOR: DANIEL PETRI

WRITER: HEYWOOD GOULD, SUGGESTED BY THE EXPERIENCES OF THOMAS MULHEARN AND PETE TESSITORE

STARS: PAUL NEWMAN, EDWARD ASNER, KEN WAHL, DANNY AIELLO, PAM GRIER, RACHEL TICOTIN AND KATHLEEN BELLER

I'd heard good things about *Fort Apache, the Bronx*, which has become a cult film for a star as huge as Paul Newman, but I'd never seen it and I didn't really know what it was.

Well, it's a crime film that's set in New York City, which aims not to tell a single coherent story but to give us a taste of a whole bunch of them, using a style we're familiar with from *Hill Street Blues* and so many shows following in its wake. Fred Silverman, a network executive who developed *Hill Street Blues*, has said that his chief inspiration for it was this film, so it's the beginning of that genre, something clearly not grasped at the time. You can't measure the amount of influences something will generate from its opening weekend.

The leads are Paul Newman and Ken Wahl, as a pair of NYPD officers working at the 41st Precinct, nicknamed Fort Apache because it's an ill-equipped and rundown outpost isolated in enemy territory, 70,000 of those enemies across four square blocks of city.

To add to their concerns, a single act at the start of the film, the cold blooded murder of a pair of rookie cops, grows out of proportion. A new captain, in the capable form of Ed Asner, has been shipped in and his responses inflame the situation, leading to rioting in the streets and an outright siege of the station.

Pam Grier doesn't have a lot of screen time in this one, as was the case in *Greased Lightning*, but, boy, does she make it count this time! She plays a drug addicted hooker named Charlotte, who we might initially take for a party girl or a calculating murderess, given that she's who shoots those two cops. She sets them up, takes them down and walks away. The locals fleece the corpses clean as effectively as Jawas.

And then she's gone, but she shows back up now and again, enough for us to ditch our less severe assumptions about her character. She's definitely a hooker, with a stereotypical pimp, and she's definitely living in a different world, so high as a kite on something illegal that she can't even do her job.

Most of these characters move through the landscape like they belong there, whether it's the cops or the crooks. It started out in black and white during the opening credits, shifting into colour as they go without becoming much more colourful. This landscape is made up of crappy looking buildings, burned out buildings and piles of rubble that used to be buildings.

By comparison, Charlotte moves through it like she doesn't even notice that it's there. Her drug of choice is apparently PCP, angel dust, and it certainly has her flying in the heavens, even as she walks amidst the wreckage below.

What I loved most about this film is what a lot of critics hated about it at the time. We've

been conditioned over decades to have pretty standard expectations about crime movies and this film simply doesn't agree with them.

For one, we might expect the cops to be the good guys, but that's only partly true, with the best of the 41st serving the community but the worst being outright murderers. That triggers a new angle, about whether anyone will break the blue wall and turn in a bad apple.

For another, we might expect Charlotte, as a double cop killer moments into the movie, to get her comeuppance by the end, which is also only kinda sorta true. She does get hers, but at the hand of irony rather than the authorities. There's a magnificent shot right at the end of the film, where her story almost connects to a broader one but absolutely doesn't.

Sure, Officers Murphy and Corelli, like every other uniform at the 41st, are aware of the cop killings and they want to solve that case, but they're given a barrage of other jobs to do that simply get in the way and eat up their time.

There's a drag queen on drugs threatening to jump off a tall apartment building. There's a purse snatcher in a flying helmet they've been warned about. There's some pimp beating his whore in the street. There's a crazy man who's threatening everyone with a knife. There's an overcrowded apartment where a fifteen year old girl is about to give birth.

In each instance, Murphy and Corelli get the tough job to do and they mostly get it done. They take the drag queen off to hospital. They stop the pimp and let his hooker go. They take the knife off the crazy man. They deliver the baby and leave it and its mother healthy. Only the purse snatcher gets away, but that's just the beginning of that thread.

All this gives us a good opportunity to learn about these officers. Wahl does well as Corelli but Newman's even better as Murphy, this as much a soap opera about his character and his budding relationship with a young nurse, as it is a crime film. Of course, nothing's far from crime in the 41st, so it shouldn't surprise us to find Isabella a customer of the drug ring in operation at the hospital.

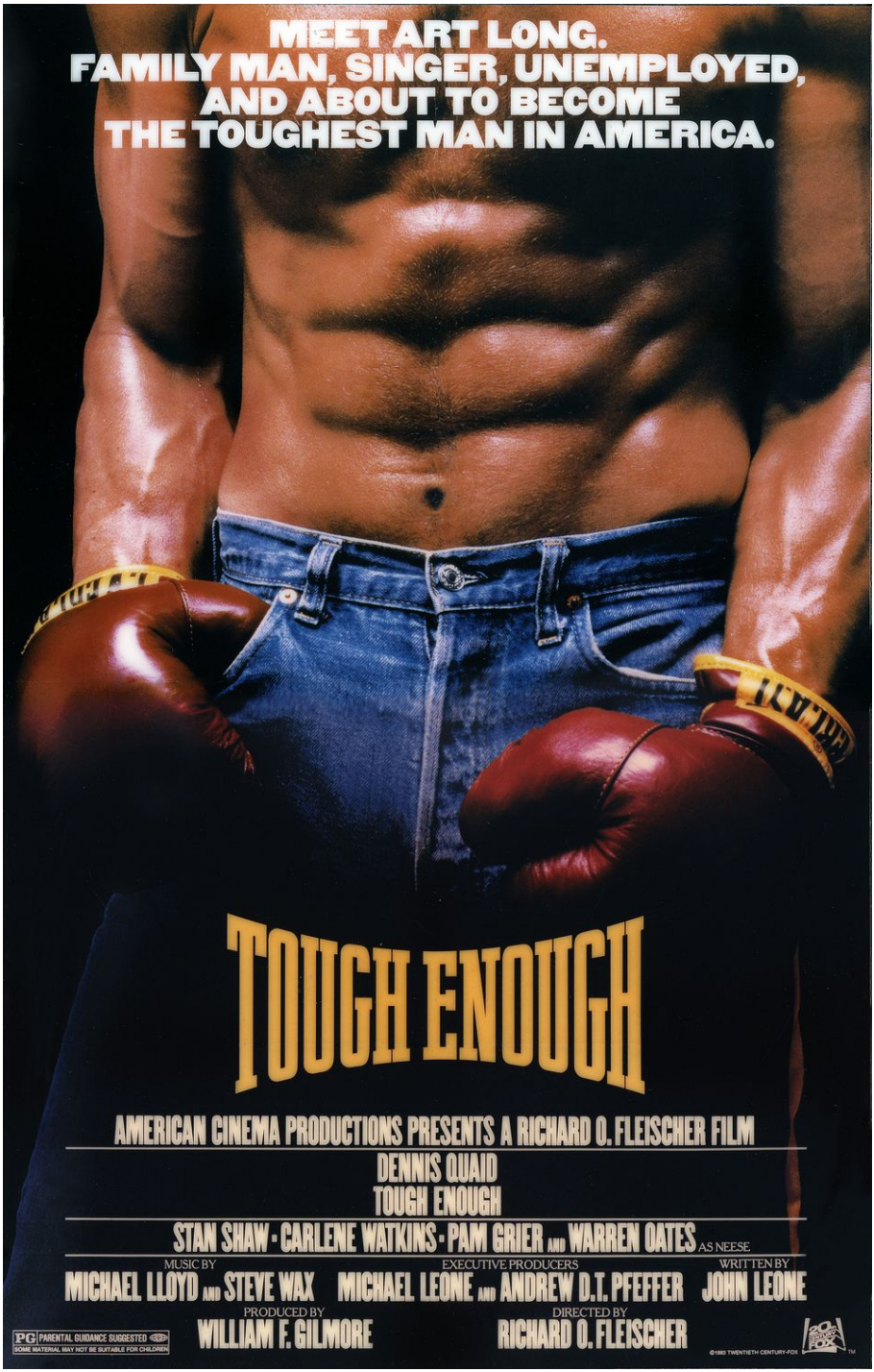
There's so much going on here, in strands of intertwined story, that we expect it to run the length of a TV season. The first season of *Hill Street Blues* ran for seventeen episodes but this only has two hours. That means that a lot of the plot strands don't go anywhere, which I'm perfectly fine with, given that this is clearly a slice of life script rather than a cosy mystery, but it can be frustrating.

What matters are the moments and the cast who bring them to life. Newman is top of the stack, but Asner and Wahl are solid, with able support from the likes of Danny Aiello, Rachel Ticotin and others. What's more, Grier is very good indeed here. Even though she doesn't get many screen minutes, she uses them to great effect. Charlotte is a pivotal character in this film and she's blistering in the role, easily the best acting she'd done thus far. Even thinking back a couple of weeks on, her scenes are the ones that stand out in my memory.

I can see why many of the critics didn't like this on its initial release. It was too different from the norm for them to quite grasp what it was doing, though some, like Roger Ebert, did suggest that it played more like a TV show.

I can also see why it became a cult hit, with its impact coming down the road. Even now, it seems ripe for reevaluation, an imperfect film now comparable mostly to the TV shows that wouldn't have existed without its influence.

Just don't blink and miss Pam Grier. She's one of the best things about the movie.


MEET ART LONG.
FAMILY MAN, SINGER, UNEMPLOYED,
AND ABOUT TO BECOME
THE TOUGHEST MAN IN AMERICA.
TOUGH ENOUGH
AMERICAN CINEMA PRODUCTIONS PRESENTS A RICHARD O. FLEISCHER FILM
DENNIS QUAID
TOUGH ENOUGH
STAN SHAW · CARLENE WATKINS · PAM GRIER AND WARREN OATES AS NEESE
MUSIC BY
MICHAEL LLOYD AND STEVE WAX
EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS
MICHAEL LEONE AND ANDREW D.T. PFEFFER
WRITTEN BY
JOHN LEONE
PRODUCED BY
WILLIAM F. GILMORE
DIRECTED BY
RICHARD O. FLEISCHER
PG PARENTAL GUIDANCE SUGGESTED
SOME MATERIAL MAY NOT BE SUITABLE FOR CHILDREN

TOUGH ENOUGH (1983)

DIRECTOR: RICHARD FLEISCHER

WRITER: JOHN LEONE

STARS: DENNIS QUAID, CARLENE WATKINS, STAN SHAW, PAM GRIER AND WARREN OATES

I really wasn't expecting to enjoy this quite so much. Sure, it's a Pam Grier film, but she's hardly in it, despite her fourth billing. It's also a Dennis Quaid film and a Warren Oates film, a bizarre pairing I'm very happy to see. Wilfred Brimley and Bruce McGill help too, as does the director being Richard Fleischer.

Those are all plus points but the genre isn't. If there's anything I'm less likely to enjoy than a sports movie, it's a romcom and this film is a sports romcom. If that wasn't enough, it's also a sports romcom about a country and western singer. In 1983. Well past the *Every Which Way But Loose* sell-by date.

Both the blurb and the torso on the poster opposite belong to Dennis Quaid's character, Art Long, who is certainly not having the best time of it as the movie begins. He has a good crowd at the Pickin' Parlour, where he sings country and plays guitar, but he also follows a wet T-shirt competition, so that crowd doesn't want Art Long. One table starts to throw stuff at him, so he clambers off stage mid-song and punches all three of them out.

That actually plays out in his favour because his wife is fed up with him not making money with his music and that prompts him to enter a toughman competition, hence the title, for a potential $5,000 prize. And that competition is run by the same folk who were offering prizes for the wet T-shirt competition. They saw him throw those punches and they were impressed enough to want him on their roster. Suddenly, he's the Country Western Warrior.

The man behind the Toughman Contest is James Neese, perfectly played by one of the all time great character actors, Warren Oates. He owns the show, runs the show, MC's the show, you name it. Bruce McGill plays his assistant, Tony Falton, and there are three ring girls to sex the show up, but that's about it. Beyond them, it's all about thirty-two local nobodies slugging it out in a, well, knockout tourny over two nights until there's only one left to take home the money.

And I do mean nobodies. Obviously this isn't a competition for professionals but they frown on amateurs too, those who might have had a dab of actual training. A few do make it in, like P. T. Coolidge, who hits it off with Art and sits in his corner to give him advice. Mostly, it's a collection of big guys who think they're tough. Most of them find out quickly that there are a lot tougher men than they are.

And this first night of preliminaries is funny in ways that provide much of the com in this romcom. Amidst the wildly ambitious swings, one fighter trips over before he does anything; another's almost blind but wins his first bout with a single punch and then knocks out the ref in his second; while a third quits before he can get hit.

It's no spoiler to point out that Art wins the $5,000 because we knew that going in. What's

the point of having the finals halfway through the movie if he doesn't go on to the nationals in Detroit, where he'll get a shot at $100,000? So, of course, he wins. Duh.

What we don't necessarily expect is how he does it, especially given that his opponent was always going to be a massive Albanian, Tigran Baldasarian, played by a professional wrestler, Steve "Monk" Miller.

For one, Art has the punches but none of the finesse, so he needs all the help he can get from Coolidge. For another, he's legitimately tough, someone who can dish out damage but also take it, as he does, in abundance. He goes down a few times and, boy, is he going to feel it in the morning!

And for a third, James Neese likes him and his gimmick, so actively plans for him to win. While these are not rigged fights, in the sense we might expect, Neese is very happy to make an inappropriate judge's decision to ensure his choice goes through, even if they clearly lost. Coolidge loses one fight like this and Art wins a couple of them.

You might be wondering where Pam Grier is in this testosterone-infused film which spends far more time in the ring than boxing movies tend to. It's mostly been fights, with a setup to show us how unhappy Art's wife Caroline is at his failure to make money as a musician.

Well, we saw her briefly early in the film, at the Pickin' Parlour, because P. T. Coolidge was next in line to perform after Art in the talent show, which is one reason why they connect backstage at the Toughman Contest, and Myra is P. T.'s girlfriend. She gets a few moments on occasion to brighten up the very male scenery a little but has nothing much to do until what might well be the best moment in the film.

Now, this is hardly a critical moment in the grand scheme of things, just like all the other potential picks for best moment, but they are welcome nonetheless.

There's one with Art Long singing his son to sleep, but choosing *The Congo Mambo*, with an array of animal noises that serve only to wake him up all the more. There's another, with Art and Caroline on a talk show, along with a few other fighters at the nationals and their better halves, including "Gay Bob and a close friend."

But this one is about P. T. and Myra, so Stan Shaw and Pam Grier. The Fort Worth show is done and Art's going to the nationals and he's bright enough to know that he'll need help, so he asks Coolidge to come along. P. T. and Myra stay in his van overnight, not wanting to be a pair of third wheels while he breaks the news to Caroline, but he hasn't told her by the time she goes shopping in the morning, so she gets into the driver's seat and has quite the shock when Myra sits up in the back with fangs on display to scare the crap out of Art.

It's a great scene and it's a great icebreaker, but it really needed to be in the movie because otherwise we'd forget that she was ever cast. She may have slightly more screen time than she did in *Fort Apache, the Bronx* but it isn't by much and she has far less opportunity. Thank the stars for those plastic fangs!

All in all, this is a much better movie than I expected it to be. It's Quaid's film with Oates stealing much of it out from under him, but it needed the reality infusion of a few characters who aren't fighters and that's where Carlene Watkins and Pam Grier come in, as a wife and a girlfriend to feel their men's pain by proxy without ever getting punched.

But that's about it.

What would you give a man who could make your deepest dream come true?
Ray Bradbury's
Something Wicked This Way Comes
RAY BRADBURY'S "SOMETHING WICKED THIS WAY COMES" A JACK CLAYTON FILM
Starring JASON ROBARDS JONATHAN PRYCE DIANE LADD PAM GRIER Produced by PETER VINCENT DOUGLAS
Screenplay by RAY BRADBURY Based on his Novel Directed by JACK CLAYTON Music Composed by JAMES HORNER TECHNICOLOR®
From WALT DISNEY PRODUCTIONS Lenses and Panaflex Camera by PANAVISION® DOLBY STEREO
Read the Bantam Book
PG PARENTAL GUIDANCE SUGGESTED
SOME MATERIAL MAY NOT BE SUITABLE FOR CHILDREN
Released by BUENA VISTA DISTRIBUTION CO., INC. © 1983 Walt Disney Productions

SOMETHING WICKED THIS WAY COMES (1983)

DIRECTOR: JACK CLAYTON

WRITER: RAY BRADBURY, BASED ON HIS NOVEL

STARS: JASON ROBARDS, JONATHAN PRYCE, DIANE LADD, ROYAL DANO
AND INTRODUCING VIDAL PETERSON AND SHAWN CARSON

It's been a long time since I watched this, a Disney feature made when I was a kid young enough to be under their spell and not yet old enough to know what damage they'd done to the public domain.

I was twelve when it was released so I may well have seen it on TV a few years later as a mid-teen. I don't think it was the right time, because I was old enough to have graduated to bona fide horror movies and would have been disappointed that the something wicked didn't come with more gratuitous gore.

Now I'm a grandfather who's very aware of just how much Ray Bradbury did for fantasy, I can see this from a couple of angles. After all, it's a story about kids, like so many others, and about the magic that they can still see in the world, but it's also a story about a father (old enough to be a grandfather) who's allowed his life to slip by unfulfilled and who finally finds his purpose and reason to truly live.

I'm surprised at how well it stands up today, but Ray Bradbury did adapt his own novel for the script and, while I didn't know who he was when I first saw this, I certainly do now. Most of the best aspects of the film come from him and the way director Jack Clayton, a couple of decades on from *The Innocents*, brought power to his fictional small town.

It's a town where everyone knows everyone and they all have eccentricities. Mr. Halloway never takes risks, he says, smoking a cigar; he has a bad heart and feels old. Mr. Tetley sells cigars and only cares for money, playing the numbers in search of riches. Mr. Crosetti, the barber, sells youth and dreams of women. Ed the bartender only has one leg and remembers his glory days on the football field.

We focus on a couple of kids, one of whom is our narrator, remembering back to October of his twelfth year. He's Will Halloway, quiet and thoughtful, as befits the son of a librarian. His best friend is Jim Nightshade, a budding rebel whose father is abroad, somewhere exotic and mysterious, from which he'll bring back weird presents when he returns. Not that we expect him to do so, because we're not twelve.

A storm is coming and ahead of it Tom Fury, a lightning rod salesman, in the ramshackle form of Royal Dano, who looks like a hobo and has a clever spiel. He's selling protection for houses, he says, and Jim buys one to fit to his roof. We know this will have meaning and, of course, it does, once we learn about something wicked and what ramifications it brings.

The imminent storm heralds the arrival of Dark's Pandemonium Carnival, which shakes up the town on a scale we only slowly grasp. Bradbury builds the chaos with panache and it all feels close to perfect for a while, the family friendly nature of a Spielberg movie with the darkness of something more adult. Jonathan

Pryce, a nobody at the time, is magnificent as Mr. Dark, a blistering anchor for all the terror that follows. And Pam Grier is his assistant.

In keeping with her previous few movies, it doesn't bring a lot of screen minutes for her, but she gets plenty of opportunity to make the most of them, much more akin to *Fort Apache, the Bronx* than *Tough Enough*, though no drugs are needed here because they have magic.

Her first appearance is wonderful. The boys investigate the carnival, which has arrived by train and mysteriously set up in no time flat. They find themselves inside a caravan, where they brush cobwebs off photos while we watch Pam in the shadows, behind widow's weeds, a tarantula on her hand that she quietly strokes. Their scream triggers the carnival music.

When it opens the next day, Pam's close to omnipresent. She's the medium, still wearing her spiderweb veil, telling the barber that he should call those exotic women. She's there as the cigar store owner wins $1,000 and a ticket to the ferris wheel, riding it with him, in a far more traditional veil. She's even there caught up in the exotic show dance, with an eastern veil mostly hiding her. Perhaps the boys who watch through a flap in the tent don't identify her, but we certainly do.

Given that all of these locals go in but none of them come out, we have to wonder just how dangerous Pam is, even though her lines are tantalisingly sparing. She acts here like this is a silent movie and she doesn't have benefit of speech, so has to tell her stories through other means, with glances, expressions, movements, each of which she nails. It's not a big part, but it's a good one.

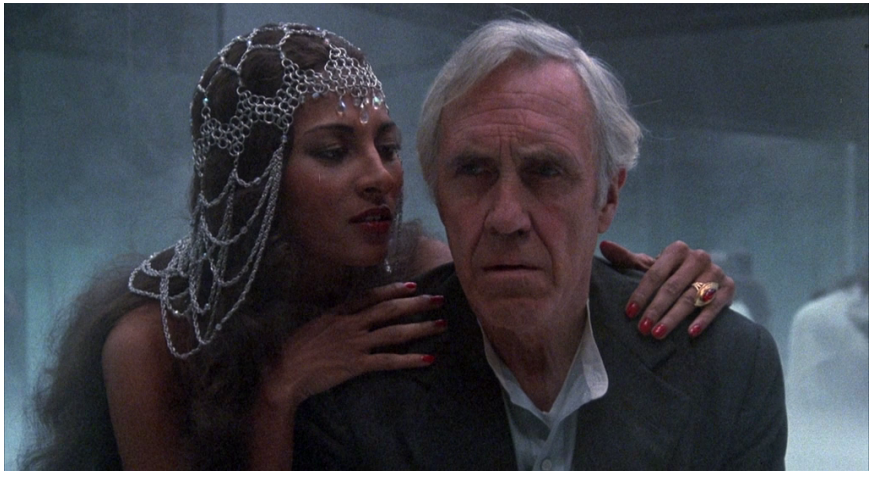
Of course, the boys figure out what's going on and that threatens Mr. Dark's ability to do whatever it is that he's doing and you need to watch this yourself to figure all that out. Let's just say that it's as dark and as dastardly as it ought to be and I thoroughly appreciated it as an adult, able to see much more depth than I would have done as a teenager.

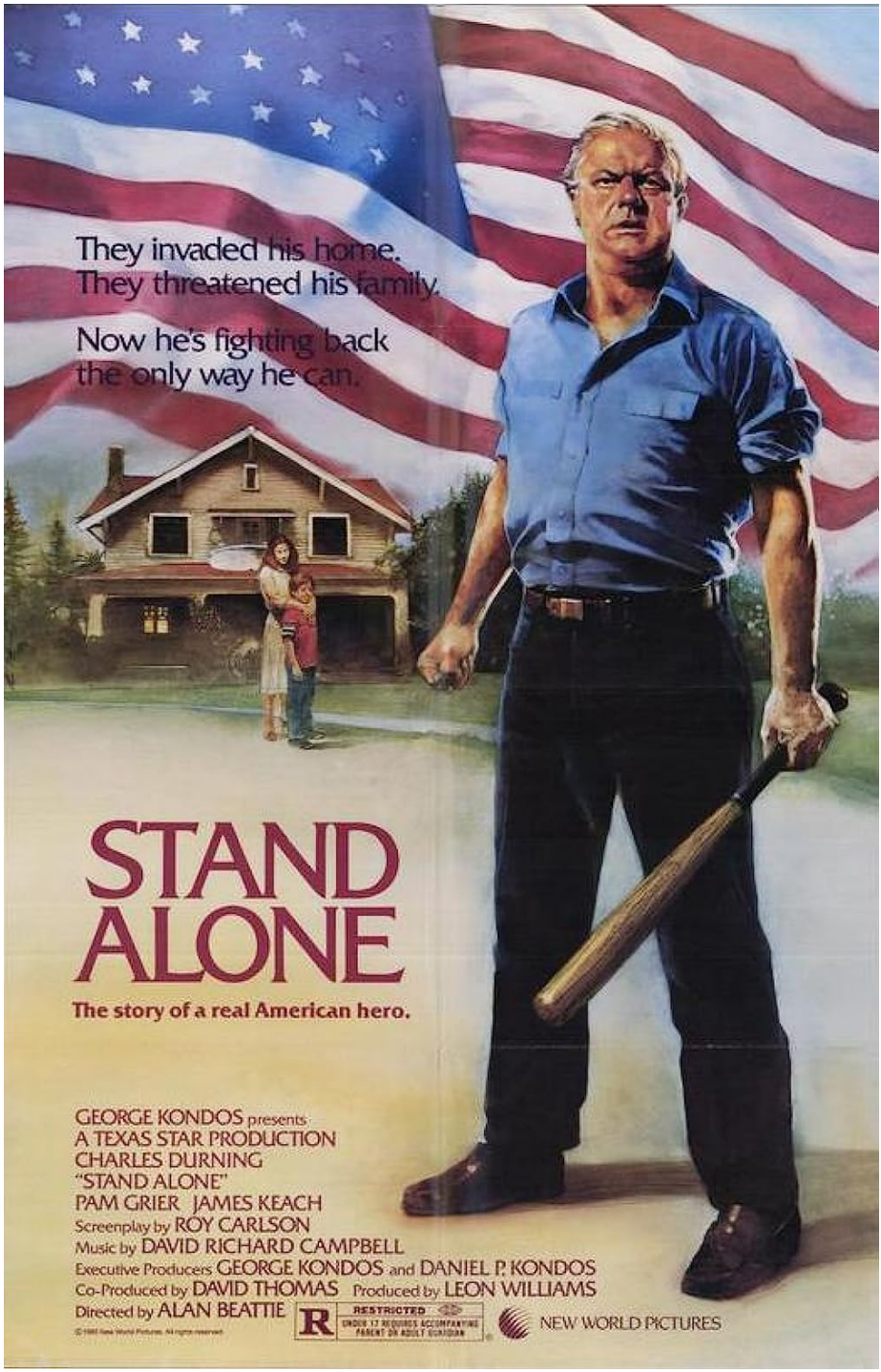
While Pryce dominates as Mr. Dark, stalking his way through the picture; Grier is the dark and dangerous delight, credited as the Dust Witch, who works so much of his magic; and, of course, we're supposed to be focused on the two boys who stumble onto so much that they aren't supposed to; the star of the picture is actually Jason Robards, as Will's dad, Charles Halloway, who has the eventual story arc.

He's good here too, as I've learned he always was, another fantastic character actor not well enough known today, but he's hindered by his key scenes being accompanied by what might have been astoundingly good CGI for its day but is astoundingly primitive to us today. Now, some of the effects are definitely better than others, but they often take us out of the tone of the movie. This is a rare film that may well benefit from a remake, if awarded to the right filmmaker. Guillermo del Toro springs quickly to mind. Someone make it happen.

That said, I was shocked at how capably this played in 2023. I was looking forward to it, as it had been so long and I wanted a fresh look at Robards, Pryce and Grier in a Bradbury tale, but it exceeded my expectations. Those effects are sometimes troublesome and it does lag at points, but it's still strong, especially early on, maybe for half its running time.

It's also surprisingly traumatising, with one scene with spiders easily the stuff of children's nightmares. I don't remember it affecting me at all, but I was a few years older than I ought to have been when I saw it. This is a movie to watch at twelve. It'll have an impact.




They invaded his home.
They threatened his family.
Now he's fighting back
the only way he can.
STAND ALONE
The story of a real American hero.
GEORGE KONDOS presents
A TEXAS STAR PRODUCTION
CHARLES DURNING
"STAND ALONE"
PAM GRIER JAMES KEACH
Screenplay by ROY CARLSON
Music by DAVID RICHARD CAMPBELL
Executive Producers GEORGE KONDOS and DANIEL P. KONDOS
Co-Produced by DAVID THOMAS Produced by LEON WILLIAMS
Directed by ALAN BEATTIE
R
RESTRICTED
UNDER 17 REQUIRES ACCOMPANYING PARENT OR ADULT GUARDIAN
NEW WORLD PICTURES

STAND ALONE (1985)

DIRECTOR: ALAN BEATTIE

WRITER: ROY CARLSON

STARS: CHARLES DURNING, PAM GRIER, JAMES KEACH, BERT REMSEN, BARBARA SAMMETH, LU LEONARD, LUIS CONTRERAS, WILLARD PUGH AND BOB TZUDIKER

That's such an eighties font on the opening credits and such eighties music behind them that we're almost expecting Charles Durning to star in his very own eighties Arnie movie. That music has a patriotic bent to it and that matches the huge American flag on the poster. However, all these things are misleading.

This is a drama before it's an action movie and the patriotic angle is never overplayed. It goes for character over setpiece and the hero is as scared as he is brave. Of course, if we're true to definition, he's a hero because he does what he needs to do even though he's scared, not because he happens to be a U.S. army vet who killed five enemies in a cave back in 1943 with the bayonet they stabbed him with.

Also, while Arnie is doing some interesting action work now he's in his seventies, Durning was never the muscleman and doesn't try to be here, at the age of 62. He's Louis Thibadeau, who merely wants to live a quiet life with his grandson, Gordie, and Gordie's mum, Meg, so Louis's daughter-in-law rather than daughter. That says something about his character right there and it's an excellent way to start.

He lives in a small town, which initially feels like a nice place. He hangs out at the Virginia Cafe, which is run by an old army buddy called Paddie who constantly talks about the hero in their midst. There's a parade every year and Gordie's going to march with his trumpet this time out. Louie's going to join him.

Of course, there's a dark side, as there tends to be in small towns. You don't need to listen to Jason Aldean songs to know that. One day, with Paddie in the back, a young man comes in and steals a couple of doughnuts. Louie tries to get him to do the right thing but a couple of others show up and shoot up the place, taking the thief down with extreme prejudice.

They're memorable villains: sunglasses, gold teeth, tattoos on their hands. And very large weapons. Maybe this isn't such a decent small town after all. This is gang territory and Louis escapes that skirmish with some shrapnel in his arm after diving into one of the booths.

The cops want him to come downtown and look through the photos of the usual suspects, and that's where we meet Pam Grier, who's an attorney who works for the public defender. She's Cathryn Bolan and she's known Louis all her life, so she gives him a lift home and they talk about the details.

Of course, through the magic power of plot convenience, one of the people she's assigned to defend next, charged with stealing a car, is a gangbanger with a gold tooth and a tattoo on his hand. So, she warns Louis. That wasn't just street gang violence, she explains. That was an assassination by professional killers, part of an international drug smuggling ring. It's serious stuff and he needs to take it seriously.

Initially, Louis shrugs it off: "I haven't done anything to them," he points out. "They're not gonna do anything to me." And, if you believe that, then you'll be wondering why we're only half an hour into ninety. What could the script possibly have in store for Louis Thibadeau?

Well, yeah, most of you could write the rest of the script yourselves because it's clear what will happen. However, you may not write it as quite the character study that Roy Carlson did.

There are other characters involved, but not a lot of them. This doesn't turn into *Road House* with everyone in town joining forces. It's a bit more akin to *High Noon* with Louis doing what he needs to do mostly on his own. He gets his family out of there and Cathryn shows up not because he asked her to but because she has a feeling she knows what he's planning.

Yes, Pam gets to kick some ass. No, she does not get to be a kickass lead the way she did in what must have now seemed like a bygone era in films like *Coffy* and *Foxy Brown*. This is firmly Charles Durning's show and she gets to barge in on his action rather than save the day.

The bad guys are bad guys and that's all we need to know, but there's a cop in the middle. He's Det. Isgrow, in the capable form of James Keach, and he's definitely not in the pocket of the cocaine cowboys but he also wants to take them down more than he wants to keep Louis safe, which puts the ball firmly in the court of the 62 year old U.S. army veteran, who learns quickly just what he's got himself into.

I liked this movie, which feels rather tame compared to the usual eighties action fare. It's about character rather than muscles, Durning bringing some serious depth to his role, and it feels far more believable because of it.

There is one scene that we can easily see in Arnie's hands, when Louis walks into a billiard hall, where he knows the bad guys hang out, and puts his gun right into the one dude's face and tells him that he's Death. Then he leaves, goes back home and puts up his American flag.

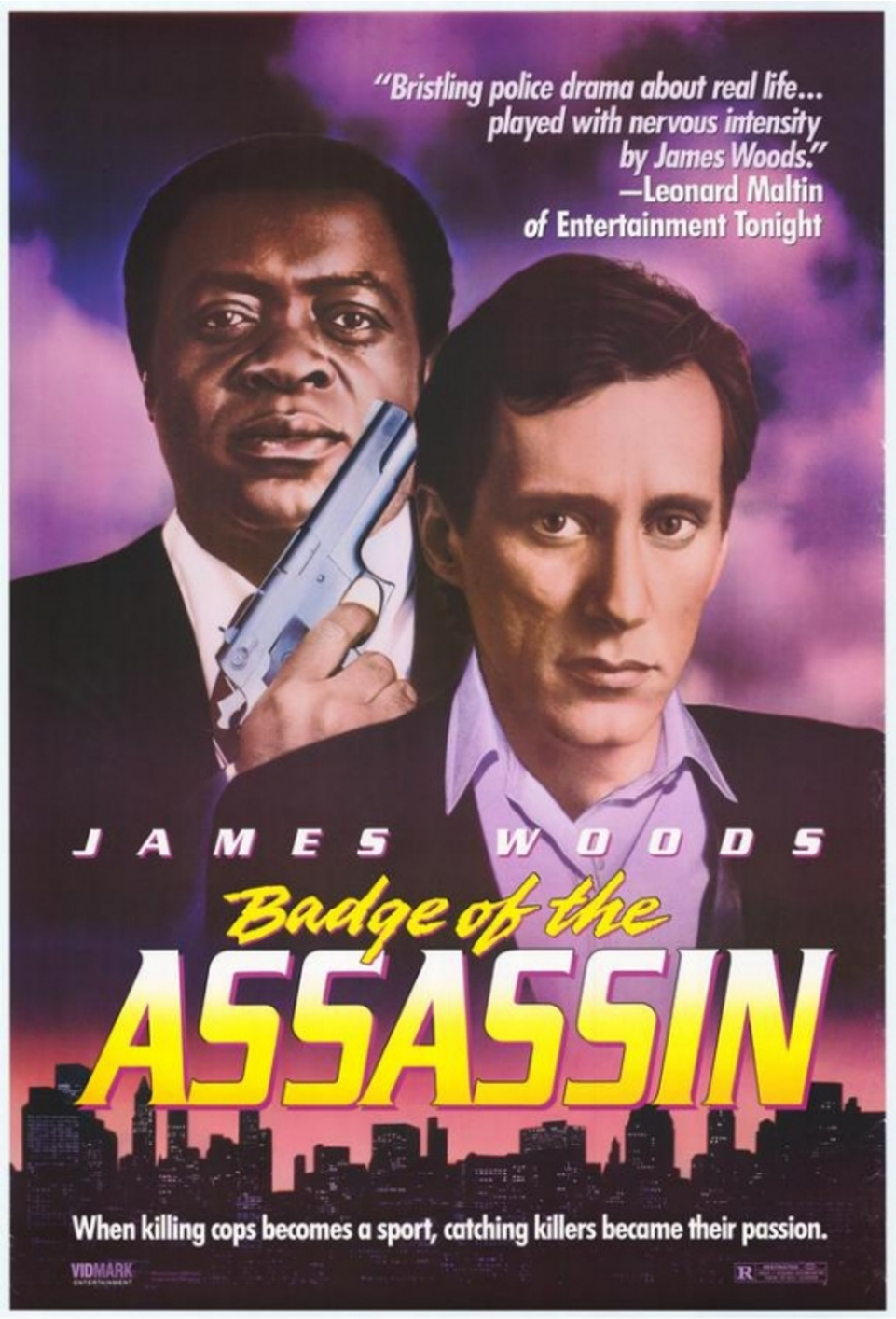
The thing is that Arnie would have made it a tough guy moment, with a cheesy one-liner to underline it. Durning does it because he knows he needs to, given that they've just beaten up Paddie as a message, but we can also tell that he's crapping himself and collecting himself at the same time in order to get the job done. It's a far more meaningful act and scene.

Talking of cheesy one-liners, that's not how this film rolls. There's a great line when Louis suggests, "I tried to do this right but I did it all wrong." That's not Arnie-catchy but it's a heck of a lot deeper.

Without attempting to spoil the movie, I'd suggest that it doesn't quite end the way we're used to either. The good guys do beat the bad guys, don't worry. Like you expected anything else? However, it doesn't feel like they won. It feels like they survived, which is different to a large degree. And they survived for now.

Durning is excellent here and I'm trying to remember last time I saw him play a lead. I'm used to him being given prominent supporting roles that are pivotal to movies but don't lead the credits. It's great to see him not just at the top of the bill but justifying it at 62 years old.

I'd have liked to have seen more of Grier but it's fair that she wasn't given a chance to steal a show that was never intended to be hers. It's more screen time than she'd had recently and in longer scenes too, but she's definitely firm support alongside James Keach. She's decent, of course, but it's not her best acting, the part not close to being as challenging as her role in *Fort Apache, the Bronx*. I'm waiting for another one like that, but with more screen time.


"Bristling police drama about real life... played with nervous intensity by James Woods."
—Leonard Maltin
of Entertainment Tonight
JAMES WOODS
Badge of the
ASSASSIN
When killing cops becomes a sport, catching killers became their passion.
VIDMARK
R

BADGE OF THE ASSASSIN (1985)

DIRECTOR: MEL DAMSKI

WRITER: LAWRENCE ROMAN, FROM THE BOOK BY ROBERT K. TANENBAUM AND PHILIP ROSENBERG

STARS: JAMES WOODS, YAPHET KOTTO, ALEX ROCCO, DAVID HARRIS, STEVEN KEATS, LARRY RILEY, PAM GRIER, RAE DAWN CHONG AND RICHARD BRADFORD

Pam Grier's career began with the seventies, with 1970's *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls*, and it kept her busy until 1977 with women in prison movies and blaxploitation flicks bringing her a level of exploitation stardom. Transitioning to respectable cinema, though, was a struggle.

She made eighteen features in a mere eight years from 1970 to 1977, many as the lead. In the next eight years, she made only five, none as the star and only one with a sizeable role. It isn't this one, because she's firmly kept in the background, as support for a supporting actor.

This was a TV movie and, if I hadn't told you that, you'd figure it out within a few minutes, because it looks and feels like a TV movie and it only gets more like a TV movie as it goes. It's unmistakably a TV movie, for all the good and bad that might suggest.

It starts out rather like *Fort Apache, the Bronx* with a couple of cops being murdered by black folk, this time in Harlem, but this is different. It's not a strung out hooker, it's a black power terrorist group making a statement: the B.L.A., or Black Liberation Army, an offshoot of the Black Panthers. And so this isn't framed like a mystery; it's another story about race and, as you might imagine, given that it's a TV movie, it's also based on a true story.

Even though this was 1985, the real events took place in 1971 and were written up in the 1979 true crime book by Robert K. Tanenbaum and Philip Rosenberg. Tanenbaum's the name we should focus on there, because he was the A.D.A. who prosecuted the case and he's the lead character, in the form of James Woods.

What follows is as relentless and detailed as you might expect from a TV movie based on a true crime book written by an attorney about that attorney. I don't know how accurate it is or isn't, but it speaks primarily to the tenacity of the legal eagle hero rather than the social background that led to black power and an act of terrorism against figures of white authority.

The good here is that it's all about the nitty gritty. The bad here is, well, exactly the same thing. If you want to get bogged down in these details, you may love this. If that's everything you hate about true crime TV movies, this will not remotely change your mind.

So we watch the act. Three black men set up two cops in Harlem with a fake call and shoot them both dead outside. They steal their guns. Waverley Jones and Joseph Piagentini are the sixth and seventh cops killed that year in New York City. The B.L.A. claims responsibility. The mayor attends the funerals.

Then we skip to San Francisco three months later, where two of the same black men aim to kill another cop, but their gun jams and so the intended target gives chase, calls in backup and catches them. They're Albert Washington and Anthony Bottom. They have Jones's gun in

their possession and one of theirs matches the Harlem murders. But the line-up doesn't work out. Hey, it's been three months.

Pam Grier finally shows up in the Bronx, as the cops arrest Gabriel and Francisco Torres in a raid, to be charged with the Harlem killing. She's one of their girlfriends, Alexandra "Alie" Horn; a young Rae Dawn Chong is her younger sister, Christine.

Two years later, there's James Woods as the A.D.A. inheriting the case and not liking it one bit because the cops haven't helped him in the slightest. For instance, the girls are in Riker's, where they've been held for thirteen months without charge. What are the odds they might help prosecute the bad guys? Not high.

Chong has more to do than Grier, who gets one scene during the arrest, another when the A.D.A. visits her in Riker's and a third late in the film when she testifies in court. Oh, and a few moments in flashback scenes as either she or Christine explain what happened when the boys got back from their hit.

Let's just say she doesn't have a heck of a lot to do and the circumstances make it even less. For one, much of what she's tasked to do is act confrontational and not want to talk. Her best scene ought to be the court scene but, frankly, the best actor in the movie is Steven Keats as the defense attorney, Harold Skelton, who gets to dominate her and other witnesses.

So, beyond not being a particularly great TV movie, it's certainly not a great movie for Pam Grier. She does what she needs to do, but that doesn't give her any real opportunity.

James Woods has the most screen time, of course, and he does have "nervous intensity", as Leonard Maltin's words on the poster point out, but I didn't enjoy his performance. I felt that his nervous intensity was annoying, as if the A.D.A. was doing cocaine throughout as a way to deal with the constant frustrations of the case. That said, the best scene in the movie is his, when he meets with Joseph Piagentini's widow Diane, played by Toni Kalem, and gains some focus after she presses him relentlessly to put her husband's killer away.

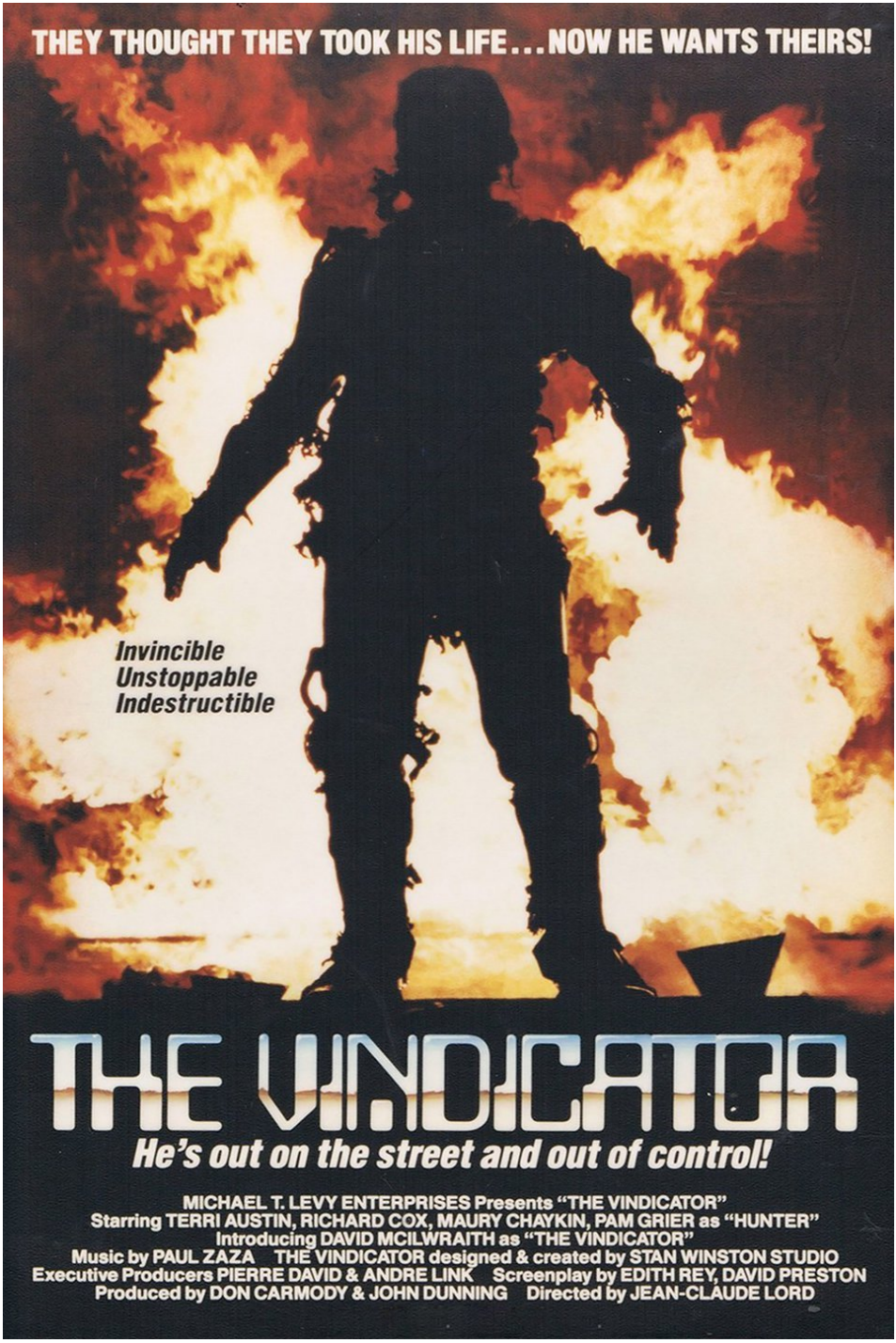
I enjoyed Yaphet Kotto much more as Det. Cliff Fenton, who Tanenbaum brings in as the officer in charge because he's black. Kotto has some good scenes too, like a neat sting that he pulls off in New Orleans.

I didn't enjoy Steven Keats's performance in the slightest but I appreciated how damn good it was. The actor does a fantastic job, but the character he plays is loathsome, indulging in constant blatant witness intimidation, about which the judge does precisely nothing.

It's clear that the film tries to be gritty and procedural and it doesn't entirely fail, but it's a series of small steps forward over two hours, with countless introductions of characters we don't care about and constant shifts from here to there and back again. It gets tiring, which is perhaps appropriate, given that it takes three months to catch the bad guys, three years to get them into court and then, after a mistrial because the jury can't reach a verdict, another year to get to where we had to get to all along.

What frustrated me the most was that it's a movie without a purpose. If it meant to tell the truth, then it did so in a very focused manner, ignoring every ounce of important context. If it meant to praise the hero for sticking with it and getting the job done, it certainly doesn't see him as a saint. If it meant to detail process from crime to conviction like *Law & Order*, it mostly shows us what's broken in the system.

Does that make for good entertainment? I'm not convinced.


THEY THOUGHT THEY TOOK HIS LIFE...NOW HE WANTS THEIRS!
Invincible
Unstoppable
Indestructible
THE VINDICATOR
He's out on the street and out of control!
MICHAEL T. LEVY ENTERPRISES Presents "THE VINDICATOR"
Starring TERRI AUSTIN, RICHARD COX, MAURY CHAYKIN, PAM GRIER as "HUNTER"
Introducing DAVID MCILWRAITH as "THE VINDICATOR"
Music by PAUL ZAZA THE VINDICATOR designed & created by STAN WINSTON STUDIO
Executive Producers PIERRE DAVID & ANDRE LINK Screenplay by EDITH REY, DAVID PRESTON
Produced by DON CARMODY & JOHN DUNNING Directed by JEAN-CLAUDE LORD

THE VINDICATOR (1986)

DIRECTOR: JEAN-CLAUDE LORD

WRITERS: EDITH REY AND DAVID PRESTON

STARS: TERI AUSTIN, RICHARD COX, PAM GRIER, MAURY CHAYKIN, LYNDA MASON GREEN, DENIS SIMPSON, STEPHEN MENDEL, LARRY AUBREY, MICKI MOORE, CATHERINE DISHER AND DAVID MCILWRAITH

The Vindicator is not a good movie. Let me get that out of the way right from the start. It deserves most of the jabs and criticisms hurled at it over the years. There are plenty of things objectively wrong with it. But, goddamn, it's a heck of a lot of fun!

It's as quintessentially eighties sci-fi schlock as the typeface used its the opening credits. I couldn't remember its name so I googled "'80s computer font" and it was the first result. And, of course, it rolls onto the screen to the sound of a dot matrix printer but in the mainframe shade of green. Oh, and there's a score that's a clear knockoff of John Carpenter's style.

What's more, everything looks familiar and I don't mean the movie. I think I recognise the car park and the glass architecture of the desk the receptionist sits behind. It's that generic. It didn't bode well but it picked up quickly.

We find ourselves in a clearly unethical lab with long suffering scientist types figuring out how to turn a mild mannered chimp into some sort of raging monster. Like you do. Of course, then the amoral lead scientist wanders in and promptly takes it too far so the chimp dies and he provides absolutely no emotional response.

He's Alex Whyte, played to icy perfection by Richard Cox. Carl Lehman works for Alex and is wildly pissed at him for stealing his budget, his computer chips and his research. I wonder what might happen next, especially given that David McIlwraith got an "introducing" credit as Carl Lehman/Frankenstein. Take a wild stab in the dark. You'll be on the right lines.

So yeah, Alex suckers him into a dangerous situation in the lab and stages an explosion to kill him. There's a funeral and everything, but his body is still alive, kinda sorta, in a tank in Alex Whyte's huge lab. It's "a living brain in an indestructible mechanical body." What could possibly go wrong with Project Frankenstein?

I absolutely adore the ambition here. This is kind of rocket science, given that Whyte's real project is designing a spacesuit that NASA will be able to use on Mars, so I'm sure he and his team are extra-smart people. However, it's the ultimate in arrogance to believe that they can plug something as complex as a human brain into a computer and control it with tech that struggles to manage 2D vector graphics.

Then again, this is such a B-movie rendition of the time-honoured Frankenstein story that we're soon gifted with priceless dialogue like, "I still don't understand why you connected the Rage Response Activator to the computer. If he senses any kind of threat he could turn into an uncontrolled killer."

Shock horror! After they fail to activate this new rage machine and Alex storms off into the night to pout at the failure of his minions, the

creature wakes and sits up just like he's Jason Voorhees. Next thing we know, the very cute lab assistant, Gail Vernon, is taken down by a bevy of rage filled monkeys. Oh, the karma!

Just in case you hadn't realised just how far into outright cheese this movie will go, I must explain that the monster escapes in a garbage truck that dumps him into an incinerator, but he just pushes the wall down and walks away!

Yet my brain pays heed to details like a kid who drives into this scene, sees the Vindicator half-melted and wildly threatening, so throws his car into reverse and speeds on out of there. When was the last time a character in a movie like this did something that sane?

Anyway, Carl goes home to talk to his wife, who's sleeping in the most believably unsexy position ever, so more kudos there. Another clever detail is that he knows that he's a killer now, fully at the mercy of his Rage Response Controller, so he doesn't actually go inside to talk to his wife, just talks to her from outside.

Oh, and he has to deal with a biker gang on the way who just have to follow him into an alley to whip him with a chain. Guess how well that works out for them?

By the way, Biker #2 is some nobody called Shawn Levy who would direct all the *Night at the Museum* films and much of *Stranger Things*. I wonder if he remembers this!

Now, you may be wondering, once more for an eighties film, when Pam Grier will show up, but don't despair. She gets a lot to do here and she has an absolute blast with every second of it, as if she's relishing being back in some sort of exploitation flick.

She's Hunter, because, well, she's a hunter, and we first see her destroying Grand Master Wong at kendo. It's a wonderful reveal as she takes off her bōgu. Whyte brings her in to find his new Frankenstein's Monster with no holds barred. And she's brutal! She kills Lisa with a needle to the back of the neck while sitting in the back of a car with her, offering sympathy for the loss of her scientist boyfriend who the Vindicator just threw out of a window. When he takes to the sewers, she pursues with a full team with flamethrowers modified to fire acid. Sadly for her team, our anti-hero pulls down a gas pipe so they blow the whole place up.

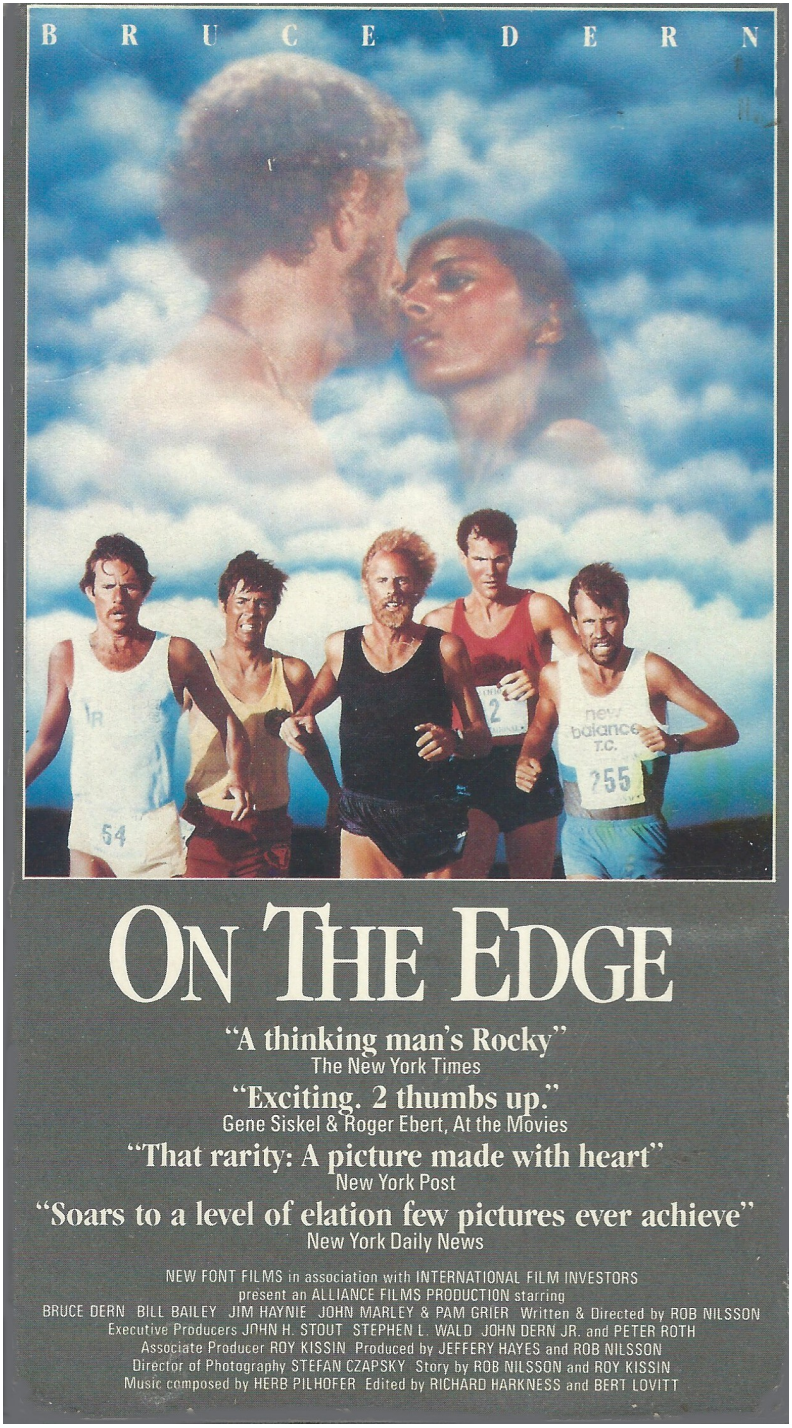
They both survive, of course, and Hunter is pissed. She storms right back to Alex Whyte to shout at him for lying to her. "Inside that suit is a man. And I've never ever lost to a man."

There's so much here to enjoy and, while an impressive amount of that is Pam Grier, who's having a lot of fun, it's frankly everywhere. In one scene, the Vindicator breaks out of a tank of resin while it's in the back of a truck, which promptly explodes as it jumps a railing to fall off a cliff. It's utterly ludicrous. It's huge fun. I almost watched it twice just because.

Grier is perfect here, in a part that may well be as substantial as her prior eight films put together, even though it's a supporting role. David McIlwraith does exactly what such an acutely ridiculous role requires. Richard Cox is pristine as the asshole scientist. Teri Austin is excellent as Carl's wife Lauren. Even the overt traitor who we're not supposed to realise is a turncoat is spot on. And I won't tell you who it is, just in case, but c'mon.

And there's a good ending! How many films like this have I seen that fall apart at the end? Far too many, but not this one.

There's no doubt that this isn't the best film in Pam Grier's First Thirty. It's not even close. But I haven't got this much enjoyment out of any of them since at least *Coffy*, maybe *The Big Bird Cage*. I'll certainly be watching it again.


B R U C E D E R N
54
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new balance T.C.
255
ON THE EDGE
"A thinking man's Rocky"
The New York Times
"Exciting. 2 thumbs up."
Gene Siskel & Roger Ebert, At the Movies
"That rarity: A picture made with heart"
New York Post
"Soars to a level of elation few pictures ever achieve"
New York Daily News
NEW FONT FILMS in association with INTERNATIONAL FILM INVESTORS
present an ALLIANCE FILMS PRODUCTION starring
BRUCE DERN BILL BAILEY JIM HAYNIE JOHN MARLEY & PAM GRIER Written & Directed by ROB NILSSON
Executive Producers JOHN H. STOUT STEPHEN L. WALD JOHN DERN JR. and PETER ROTH
Associate Producer ROY KISSIN Produced by JEFFERY HAYES and ROB NILSSON
Director of Photography STEFAN CZAPSKY Story by ROB NILSSON and ROY KISSIN
Music composed by HERB PILHOFER Edited by RICHARD HARKNESS and BERT LOVITT

ON THE EDGE (1986)

DIRECTOR: ROB NILSSON

WRITER: ROB NILSSON

STARS: BRUCE DERN, PAM GRIER, BILL BAILEY, JIM HAYNIE AND JOHN MARLEY

This is a fantastic film for star Bruce Dern, a passion project that he worked for a deferred salary. It gave him opportunity to showcase what he can do as an actor and as a runner, as it takes a fictionalised look at a real race, the Dipsea Race in California, translated here into the Cielo-Sea race that's about twice as long.

The Dipsea is a crosscountry trail race that's been held almost every year since 1905, from Mill Valley to Stinson Beach. It's seven and a half miles but they include a mountain, Mount Tamalpais, which means 2,200 feet up, in one section via 688 steps called Dipsea Trail Stairs, and 2,200 feet back down again. That's tough.

And Bruce Dern, as a runner, ran the Dipsea in 1974. In fact, he apparently ran so regularly that he put in between 2,500 and 4,000 miles a year from the ages of 28 to 70. Clearly he was well cast for this movie, because most of the best parts are him running.

There is a story here that's wrapped around the running, which ties to his character, Wes Holman, having been suspended from the race a couple of decades earlier. Apparently he tried to organise to legalise payments, in the form of airline tickets, to amateur athletes. It seems to be a detail of immense importance to the runners themselves, but not to the viewers who either don't understand the importance of it or really don't care. It's a MacGuffin.

It's important here because Holman wants to run the Dipsea again, but he's barred from registering. After trying a few things, he ends up running anyway as an unregistered runner, which is why he doesn't sport a number in the poster, and has to face increasingly desperate attempts by the organisers to grab him off the course. The heartwarming aspect to the film is that the runners are all on his side, so they're happy to help him continue and finish.

What's weird about the film is that it's a real mixed bag, so much so that I may well want to watch this again but, if I do, I'm very likely to fast forward over a bunch of it.

The best parts are truly excellent and have to do with the running, meaning both the race itself, which is cleverly shot, and the runners who take part, most obviously Holman.

The former is achieved by impressive work from debut cinematographer, Stefan Czapsky, having Steadicams on motorbikes, dollies and pickup trucks, some shots taken by the second unit director running behind the action with a camera under his arm. Czapsky built on this to land bigger gigs: *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, *Edward Scissorhands* and *Batman Returns* for a start.

The latter is writer/director Rob Nilsson's success in channelling the old loneliness of the long distance runner mood so capably that we almost find ourselves in the zone while sitting on our couches. Some of that is the focus of an impressive isolation, but much of it has to do with Dern, a natural outsider, as his years in biker movies proved, who believably exists in

his own bubble here.

The worst parts have no real business being in the movie and, sad to say, Pam Grier's part is one of them. It's not that she's bad, because she does everything she needs to do here. It's that there's no reason for her character to be in the film and an excellent one for her not to be. In fact her part was entirely cut from the theatrical release and restored for VHS. I don't believe it's been released on DVD.

She's literally a distraction. The point of the film is that Holman is getting old, supposedly 44 and looking more than that, with a greying beard, and he has to focus and work hard to be a contender in a race he ran twenty years ago. Elmo, his old trainer, tells him what he needs to do and he ignores it, even though he sought him out to begin with. And, every so often, he feels the need to take a break and find Cora.

She's an aerobics teacher but every moment she isn't in long shot leading her class, she's in a dimly lit scene with Holman, usually against a background of fish tanks for some reason, so she can take off her clothes and give him that release. And then she's gone again. That's it.

And, while it's always good to see Pam Grier in a movie, clothed or not, I have to wonder if the theatrical release is better for her absence. Frankly, it ought to be. Without Cora, Holman can concentrate on his training and if he does that, we can concentrate on it too and get into that zone with him and that's what it ought to be about: Holman running and us running all the way with him, sans the actual exercise.

When he's not distracted, Dern handles this really well, especially early on before he gets some serious training in. I thought he looked older here than he did in *The 'Burbs* and that came out three years later while this was shot three years earlier. He's easily the best thing about the movie. Sadly, Pam, through no fault of her own, is the worst.

In between the best and the worst parts are a few subplots that ought to be there, I guess, but kind of get in the way too.

The best of them is the MacGuffin about the payments because that gets a payoff, pun not intended, in the race itself, which is the entire third act. The time-honoured angle of training is less successful but has to be done in every sports movie. The problem is that it's done in every sports movie and therefore we've seen it a hundred times before and there aren't many ways to mix it up. There's also a reconciliation angle with Holman and his dad, Flash, who's an old curmudgeon who runs a junkyard and finds fault with everything and everyone. No wonder they fell out of touch. There's a slight payoff to this angle but it wasn't worth it.

For me, it's Dern and the race. I wasn't into the movie at all until I was and, when I felt it, I felt it hard. Overall, how successful it ends up depends on how much we care about the film as a whole being an effective parallel to the art and dedication of running. When you start out as a runner, it sucks. As you get better, it feels easier and more natural. And, once you've got to the top of your game, it's what you live for.

Translating that into the film, it means that you could read up a little and learn a couple of select background details, then fast forward to the race and enjoy an incredible short film of about half an hour in length. The catch is that you'd be enjoying the result without doing the work and, even if the journey's a slog, it's an integral part of the whole. Here, the emotion of the final third is there because we watched the first hour, even if we wondered why at the time.

◆ Rock Star Susanna Hoffs in her Motion Picture Debut. ◆
The ALLnighter
Who says you can't do it all in one night...
An AURORA Production A TAMAR SIMON HOFFS Film "THE ALLNIGHTER" SUSANNA HOFFS
DEDEE PFEIFFER JOAN CUSACK JAMES ANTHONY SHANTA JOHN TERLESKY and MICHAEL ONTKEAN
Written by M.L. KESSLER & TAMAR SIMON HOFFS Music by CHARLES BERNSTEIN Production Designer CYNTHIA SOWDER
Associate Producer MARGOT KESSLER Co-Producer NANCY ISRAEL Executive Producer JAMES L. STEWART
PG-13 PARENTS STRONGLY CAUTIONED
Produced and Directed by TAMAR SIMON HOFFS
A UNIVERSAL Release

THE ALLNIGHTER (1987)

DIRECTOR: TAMAR SIMON HOFFS

WRITERS: M. L. KESSLER AND TAMAR S. HOFFS

STARS: SUSANNA HOFFS, DEDEE PFEIFFER, JOAN CUSACK, JAMES ANTHONY SHANTA, JOHN TERLESKY, PAM GRIER, PHIL BROCK, KAAREN LEE AND MICHAEL ONTKEAN

From *The Vindicator*, far more fun than it has any right to be, to *The Allnighter* which, well, isn't. That said, it has a certain charm to it that got me on board by the end. It's not as bad as its 0% on the tomatometer might suggest.

For one thing, it feels like a Hollywood film that was just shot a little freer than usual, but it was an indie film that only cost a million to make. By comparison, *Predator* the same year allocated three and half just for Arnie's salary.

Then again, the star here was Susanna Hoffs of the Bangles, who isn't awful but does show why she's known as a musician not an actor. Her character, Molly Morrison, is uncertain. How did she get through four years of college without a grand romance? What will she say in her valedictorian speech? Hoffs is uncertain about acting, so actor and character merge.

Molly rooms with Val, in the form of Dedee Pfeiffer, in the biggest role I've seen her have. However, this is an ensemble piece and there are a bunch of others ready to attempt to steal the movie, starting with Joan Cusack as Gina, their other roommate, who's shooting a documentary about her last days at Pacifica.

She starts out with an observation—if you see this in twenty years, you'll remember us this way—that works for *The Allnighter* too. It feels nostalgic and, as it was inspired by (not based on) co-writer/producer/director Tamar Simon Hoffs and her friends at Yale, it could be seen as a somewhat belated documentary that the real Gina never shot.

By the way, the name is not a coincidence. Tamar Simon Hoffs is Susannah Hoffs's mum, with her daughter a easy choice for an avatar for her younger self, as well as a lower budget item for a low budget indie movie. However, it isn't exploitation, because she doesn't sing at any point and the soundtrack is Bangles-free.

As you might imagine for a film focused on three female roommates at college, there are a few guys providing key support. Initially, that means the two surfer dudes next door, CJ and Killer. John Terlesky's grin is just as powerful as ever plastered on CJ, though it's not quite a character of its own the way it was in one of my guilty pleasures, *Deathstalker II*. Killer is an actor that I failed to recognise, James Anthony Shanta. He debuted here too and did a strong job. I wonder why his film career didn't take off, but he may have chosen to stay on stage.

So Hoffs has the lead role and does what's needed but not a lot more. Dedee Pfeiffer may have been in her sister's shadow but she has enough charisma here for two characters. It's Cusack who has the acting chops but she's not in this enough. Terlesky and Shanta are good foils, there to be good looking props.

After a deliberately loose start, we gradually identify the subplots and showpieces.

The event on everyone's minds isn't really

graduation but a grand party on the beach, the Fiesta, that night, with a band and a bar and a final opportunity to check off all the things on everyone's college bucket lists.

Mickey LeRoy, lead guitarist in the Rhinos, is in town to walk down memory lane. He used to go to Pacifica and is presumably officially in town to give a speech or some such, but he's a lot more interested in hooking up with Connie Alvarez, like it hasn't been forever. He wants to see the girls' place too because it used to be his place back in his day.

While Molly wonders about true love, which is clearly going to be CJ even if he fails utterly to notice, Val is engaged to a much older dude called Brad and she'll bail on the party to meet him for a romantic night in a hotel.

And so we go. For a while, we wonder what might ever actually happen, because it seems like everything is included for its ability to add to the atmosphere, like it's only ever going to be a slice of life film, in keeping with its indie reality if not its Hollywood veneer. The detail is everywhere but there's no big picture.

Gradually most of the threads connect and it all shifts from pure drama into a comedy of errors birthed at the Playa del Mar. Brad turns out to be a complete jackass who falls asleep on Val. Molly wants CJ but Mary Lou grabs him instead, so she heads over to the hotel to try for Mickey LeRoy. Gina ends up there too with Val, who temporarily bails for the party.

And while nothing was particularly right, it all goes very much wrong for the girls, which is when Pam Grier finally arrives, an hour into the movie, for her "special appearance" as Sgt. McLeesh of the local police force.

Yep, the girls are arrested. Val and Gina are fingerprinted and photographed. Notably, the former is horrified but the latter has a blast with the whole thing; she merely wishes they hadn't confiscated her camera. They spend the night in the cells and Molly, who's managed to escape Brad's balcony after Connie shows up, ends up having to save the day in the morning and she needs CJ's help to do that.

What distinguishes this brief appearance by Pam Grier from recent brief appearances is the fact that she's having a heck of a lot of fun, so transparently that she smiles her way through her entire role. I don't know if she was set off by the situational comedy, where she ought to be the straight guy; if the shoot was just that much fun to be on, in which case she was the only one who noticed; or if she was trying to out grin John Terlesky, which is impossible. Maybe she simply enjoyed being on the other side of the bars in what is, briefly, a women in prison film. Whatever the reason, she's the least serious serious cop I may have ever seen.

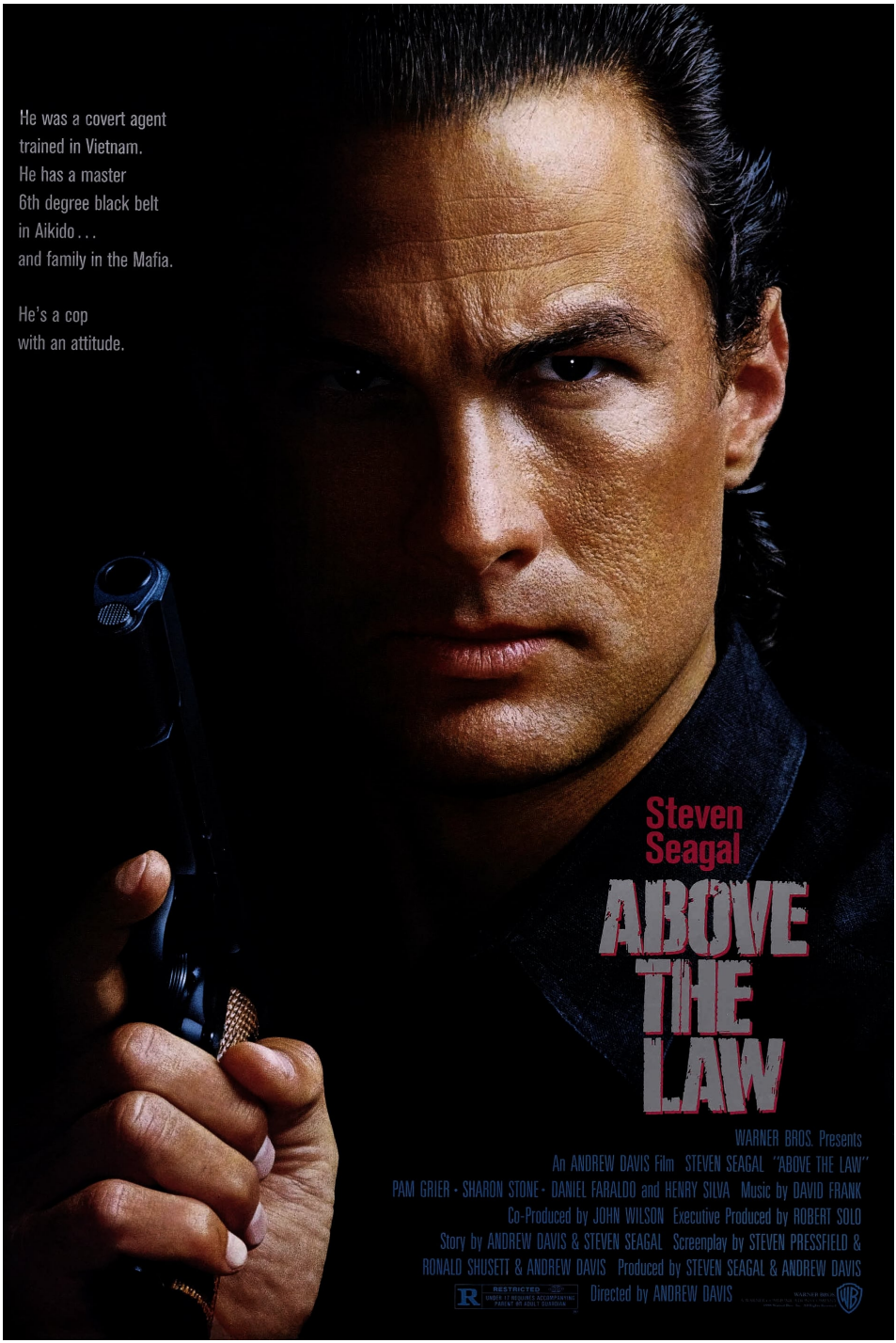
I enjoyed this more than I expected to, not just going in from the perspective of doing my duty to this project but given the way it begins in such a loose and uninspiring fashion. Why it got better in my estimation, I don't know, as I have no problem with indie slice of life films, but it eventually finds some sort of focus and some entertainment value along with it.

Its biggest problem isn't that the star is the last reason to watch it. It's that it doesn't have a clue what it wants to be when it grows up, an almost appropriate issue. Only Killer, against the odds, is already set. Everyone else still has to figure things out and the film sympathises.

And so it's a drama, a comedy of errors, an art film, a sitcom, a slice of life, an indie flick, a women in prison film, even the sort of story that might inspire a teen TV show. Ultimately, though, it's about having us remember people we don't know from two decades earlier.

WANTED BY FBI
JAMES RICHARD KIRBY

METROPOLITAN
POLICE


He was a covert agent
trained in Vietnam.
He has a master
6th degree black belt
in Aikido . . .
and family in the Mafia.
He's a cop
with an attitude.
Steven
Seagal
ABOVE
THE
LAW
WARNER BROS. Presents
An ANDREW DAVIS Film STEVEN SEAGAL "ABOVE THE LAW"
PAM GRIER · SHARON STONE · DANIEL FARALDO and HENRY SILVA Music by DAVID FRANK
Co-Produced by JOHN WILSON Executive Produced by ROBERT SOLO
Story by ANDREW DAVIS & STEVEN SEAGAL Screenplay by STEVEN PRESSFIELD &
RONALD SHUSETT & ANDREW DAVIS Produced by STEVEN SEAGAL & ANDREW DAVIS
R RESTRICTED
Directed by ANDREW DAVIS

ABOVE THE LAW (1988)

DIRECTOR: ANDREW DAVIS

WRITERS: STEVEN PRESSFIELD, RONALD SHUSETT AND ANDREW DAVIS, FROM A STORY BY ANDREW DAVIS AND STEVEN SEAGAL

STARS: STEVEN SEAGAL, PAM GRIER, SHARON STONE, DANIEL FARALDO, RON DEAN, JACK WALLACE, CHELCIE ROSS, JOE V. GRIECO AND HENRY SILVA

One of the influences for these First Thirty runthroughs was a set of three books edited by David C. Hayes, which covered everything that a trio of action legends did on screen (and, in a few instances, off it too). They're anthologies, with many hands writing chapters, and three in *Hard to Watch: The Films of Steven Seagal* are mine, though not this one, which marked his debut as an actor rather than a stuntman.

In *Hard to Watch*, Joshua Knode treated it as a sort of introduction, highlighting something that became very obvious as that book ran on: that, at this point in his career, Seagal brought something new but it quickly got old. Here, he was a wish fulfilment action hero: handsome, incredibly fluid in his movements and able to solve any problem, however complex, with a mere punch to the face. Before long, however, he bloated up substantially, lost the ability to move and complicated his film's issues with dubious morals and off screen baggage.

This isn't his best film but it's from his best period, when he was working with director Andrew Davis, also responsible for *Under Siege*, and actors of the calibre of Pam Grier (as his partner), Sharon Stone (as his wife) and Henry Silva (as the villain of the piece, just in case you were in any doubt there).

It's a simple story and an ironic one, given the core theme that's summed up in the quote abbreviated into the movie's title: "No man is above the law and no man is below the law."

The irony is partly because, while this was taken from a quote by Theodore Roosevelt, it's delivered here by Richard Nixon, the only U.S. president to resign from office, who thought it came from Lincoln, and partly because Seagal himself has managed to deflect a surprisingly large amount of lawsuits over the years.

Here, he plays Nico Toscani, a Sicilian who studied martial arts in Japan, was recruited by the C.I.A. during the Vietnam War and ended up as a sergeant in the vice squad of Chicago's police department. That's not just background because each of those details comes back into focus during the film.

The Sicilian angle is because, while he's just a cop, Nico often performs his duties like he's actually a godfather. The Japanese martial arts manifests in his graceful aikido movements, which were different to what any other action star was doing at the time. The brief stint in the C.I.A. included an incident on the border of Cambodia and Vietnam, in which he met Kurt Zagon, a rogue C.I.A. interrogator who's torturing prisoners with chemicals. When he attempts to stop him, his boss, Nelson Fox, is able to get him out safely, but his career in the spy business is over. And then to Chicago, the location for this movie.

Pam Grier shows up pretty quickly as Jacks, his partner Delores Jackson, who's on her last week on the street because she's about to shift into being a district attorney. She doesn't get a huge amount of screen time, as this is Seagal's film not hers, but it's a lot more than she had been getting in her other eighties films.

Jacks is a good contrast to Toscani, because she's by the book and he's far more by the seat of his pants, as we learn when he wanders into a bar, looking for an errant girl as a favour to her family, and beats up everyone who wants some. Michael Rooker's there, credited simply as Man in Bar. He gets a single line and clearly doesn't want any, so escapes unscathed.

At the same time, Grier is a good contrast to Seagal, because he does all the fighting but she does all the acting. Arguably, this would have been a better film if she got to do more of that, but it would have made it a different one and much of why it succeeds is because Seagal was a fresh face to action cinema and he was very much bringing something new to the mix.

Sure, he's a go getter cop, someone who will happily break laws to get bad guys, but he's a hands on go getter cop, someone who clearly knows the martial arts he's supposed to know. It's obvious that he's doing these fight scenes himself and he looks good doing it without his opponents having to make him look good. He's also happy to do his own stunts, spending one scene on the roof of a car with his hand round the passenger's throat.

By the way, that bar scene hinted that there is corruption going on, that the cops shake the place down regularly, and that's really where we're about to go. Nico and Jacks are working a drug case and he sets up a sting for cocaine traffickers, but what they find hidden in some engine blocks turns out to be C4 and U.S. Army ordnance. What's more, the bad guys that he arrests are promptly released again, as they're clearly connected. "Certain federal agencies," say the powers that be and the cops are told to stand down. Nico walks out and we know full well that he's going to carry on digging. That doubles when his local priest is blown up and becomes beyond doubt when he discovers that Kurt Zagon is somehow involved.

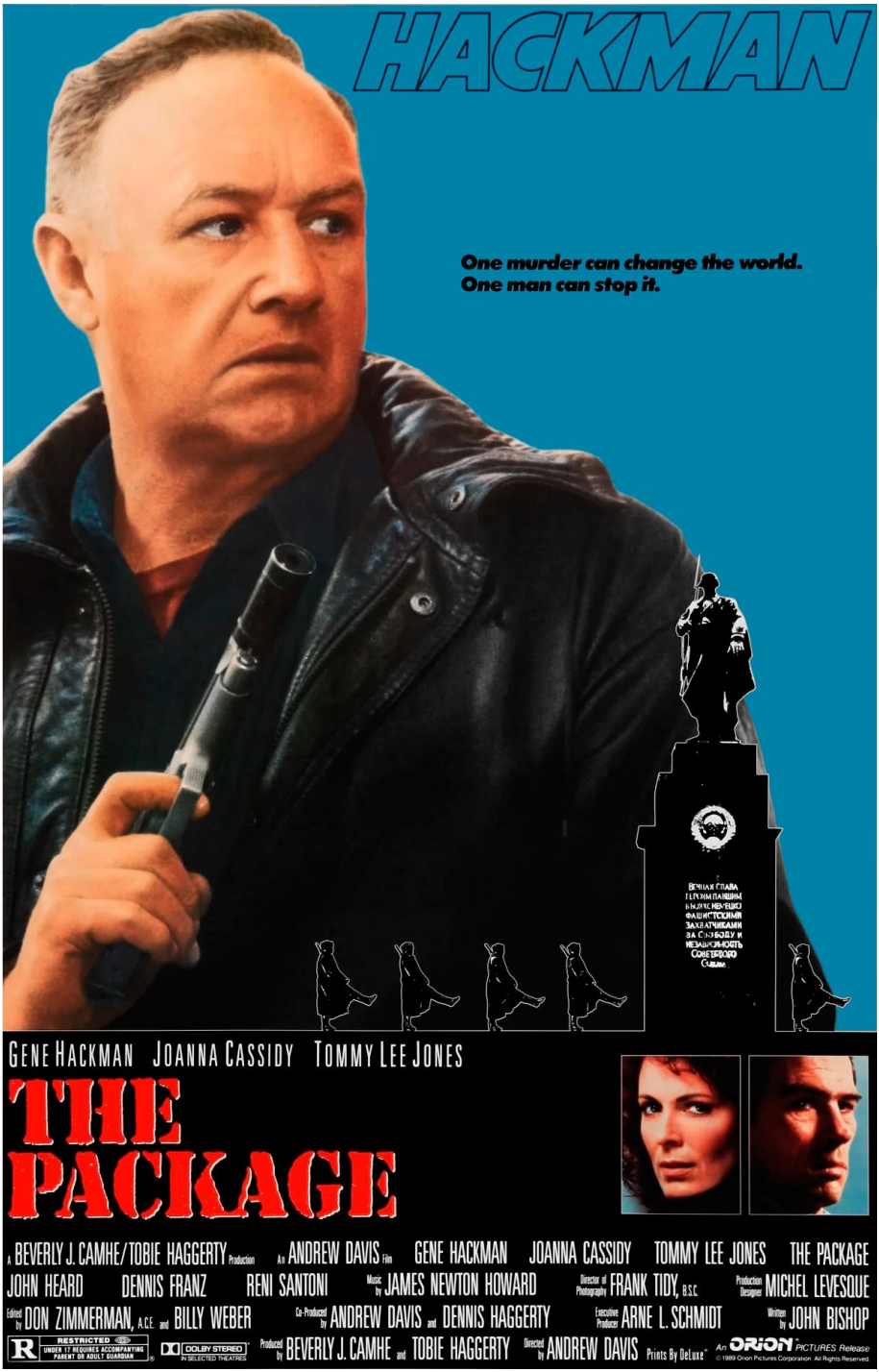
Seagal is great here, not as an actor, because he never was, but as a presence. His arrogance transfers well into the character of an honest rebel cop taking on the system and the action scenes are all fresh and exciting. Sure, they're also over the top, but far less so than much of what Arnie or Sly were doing at the time.

Grier does a good job, even if she's sidelined more than she should have been. Joe Greco is even better as Fr. Joseph Gennaro, almost as if he's acting in an Oscar contender rather than a $7.5m action flick with a debutant lead. Silva brings his usual delicious villainy. Chelcie Ross is a reliable presence as Nelson Fox and other actors playing cops and C.I.A. agents are too.

Of the major cast, only Sharon Stone doesn't shine and, while she's young and doesn't quite seem to have grown into herself yet, it's not as early in her career as it seems. *Total Recall* was only two years later, but it feels like a decade.

To be fair, she does the job she's given well enough. It's merely not much of a job, because she's sidelined far more than Pam Grier was, mostly there for Seagal to protect. In fact, for a stunningly beautiful actress, she doesn't look great in a lot of scenes, as if they had to mess up her hair and make her cry just so that she wouldn't make Seagal look bad by comparison, just as Grier's role had to be minimised so he could dominate their scenes.

And that's why this is decent but not great.


HACKMAN
One murder can change the world.
One man can stop it.
GENE HACKMAN JOANNA CASSIDY TOMMY LEE JONES
THE PACKAGE
A BEVERLY J. CAMHE/TOBIE HAGGERTY Production
An ANDREW DAVIS Film
GENE HACKMAN JOANNA CASSIDY TOMMY LEE JONES THE PACKAGE
JOHN HEARD DENNIS FRANZ RENI SANTONI
Music by JAMES NEWTON HOWARD
Director of Photography FRANK TIDY, B.S.C.
Production Designer MICHEL LEVESQUE
Edited by DON ZIMMERMAN, A.C.E. and BILLY WEBER
Co-Produced by ANDREW DAVIS and DENNIS HAGGERTY
Executive Producer ARNE L. SCHMIDT
Written by JOHN BISHOP
RESTRICTED
DOLBY STEREO
Produced by BEVERLY J. CAMHE and TOBIE HAGGERTY
Directed by ANDREW DAVIS
Prints By DeLuxe
An ORION PICTURES Release

THE PACKAGE (1989)

DIRECTOR: ANDREW DAVIS

WRITER: JOHN BISHOP

STARS: GENE HACKMAN, JOANNA CASSIDY, TOMMY LEE JONES, DENNIS FRANZ, RENI SANTONI, PAM GRIER, CHELCIE ROSS, RON DEAN, KEVIN CROWLEY, THALMUS RASULALA, MARCO ST. JOHN AND JOHN HEARD

While Steven Seagal would star in a second movie for director Andrew Davis, *Under Siege* in 1992, a host of other actors did that a little quicker, returning for his very next film, *The Package*. Pam Grier's back. Chelcie Ross is back. Joe Greco's back. Thalmus Rasulala is back. We soon recognise bit part actors so half the cast must be back.

This is a very different film to *Above the Law* though, starting out as a late Cold War thriller and growing into a sort of precursor to Davis's best film, *The Fugitive*. And when I say late Cold War I do mean about as late as it gets. This is August 1989 and Americans and Russians are talking peace in East Berlin.

For something that sounds talky, it starts as pure testosterone. Lots of soldiers. Lots of VIPs with grey hair sitting around big tables. An agreement is reached, which will be signed at the United Nations ten days later. But there's a group of rogue generals, from both sides, with zero interest in losing their nuclear shields, so they have a week and a half to do something to throw a spanner into the peace works.

Gene Hackman is there in East Berlin and he knows even more people than we do, but he's merely a sergeant, Johnny Gallagher. He seems capable but he becomes an easy fall guy for an assassination, by a couple of fake hikers, of an American general who chooses not to be part of whatever nefarious plot is unfolding.

That lands him what seems to be a nothing job as punishment, that of escorting another Army sergeant back home for a court martial, as he's acquired quite a habit of punching his superior officers. He's the Package of the title.

He's also Walter Henkey, played by Tommy Lee Jones, and he gets away soon after landing in Washington, D.C. Now, did he escape on his own or did he have an undercover team ready in place to assist him, populated with another bunch of faces that we recognise from *Above the Law*? Well, that's a good question.

To find an answer, Gallagher visits Henkey's wife and promptly discovers that Henkey isn't Henkey. Who he is remains unclear but there's obviously something fishy going on and only Gallagher is aware of it. This is our real story and Davis keeps it all moving forward in a very tense manner. It's not quite Tommy Lee Jones playing the Fugitive, but it does feel a little like that at points and it's a good template to follow, even if this came first by four years.

Pam Grier shows up soon after we reach this point. Gallagher enlists the help of his ex-wife, Lt. Col. Eileen Gallagher, who clearly outranks him, to have her run Henkey's service record. She's Joanna Cassidy, perhaps best known as Zhora in *Blade Runner*, but Grier is the records expert that she calls in next, Lt. Ruth Butler.

She's a mousy sort here, prim and proper with her hair held back in a bun. However, she is very capable indeed and manages to figure out who the Package really is and, in doing so, just how dangerous a soldier he is too. Ruth is acutely nervous as she passes this information along to Eileen but she continues on anyway, digging deeper until she triggers unauthorised alerts and seals her own death warrant.

That's it for Grier in this film, so it's a small but crucial part once again. It's frustrating to see an actress of her talent relegated to just a few scenes, as was so often the case during the eighties, but it's also affirming that, when a director needed someone reliable to deliver a pivotal discovery in his film, he called her.

Now that she's connected the dots, the story moves forward, of course, and it gets to where you might expect. The problem is the timing, because we know with hindsight exactly how peace talks ended up in 1989 and how they shifted the balance of power across the globe.

You see, in our reality, there was the Pan-European Picnic. Otto von Habsburg, then the president of the Paneuropean Union, invited all East Germans to a bacon roast in Hungary. 661 of them showed up, tore down a gate and the guards did nothing to stop them. Three days later, Miklós Németh, Prime Minister of Hungary, officially opened his border and that was enough to dissolve East Germany, collapse the entire Eastern Bloc and end the Cold War.

The dates are important. The Pan-European Picnic was held on 19th August, 1989 and the Hungarian border opened on 22nd August, 1989. This picture opened in theatres on 25th August, 1989.

I didn't see it on original release, but it must have seemed acutely topical, fiction built on a bedrock of fact with the events that unfold not entirely unlikely to appear in the headlines of the next week and the week after that.

However, it must also have seemed acutely ambitious, the decision to release so topical a movie at so crucial a time a real gamble on the part of Orion Pictures. News travels fast and it changes even faster.

Only three months later, the Berlin Wall fell and nobody doubted that the Cold War, which didn't officially end until December 1991, was absolutely on its last legs. Peace was inevitable and this film, so topical in August, had been relegated to a bygone era by November. It's alldated now and even contrary, hinting as it does that the inevitable wasn't, in fact, at all inevitable.

Against that backdrop, the red herrings we fall for mean next to nothing. It's all capable stuff, a tight textbook of a thriller, but I found that I didn't really care. I wanted to know who the good guys and the bad guys were and that was never going to be forthcoming.

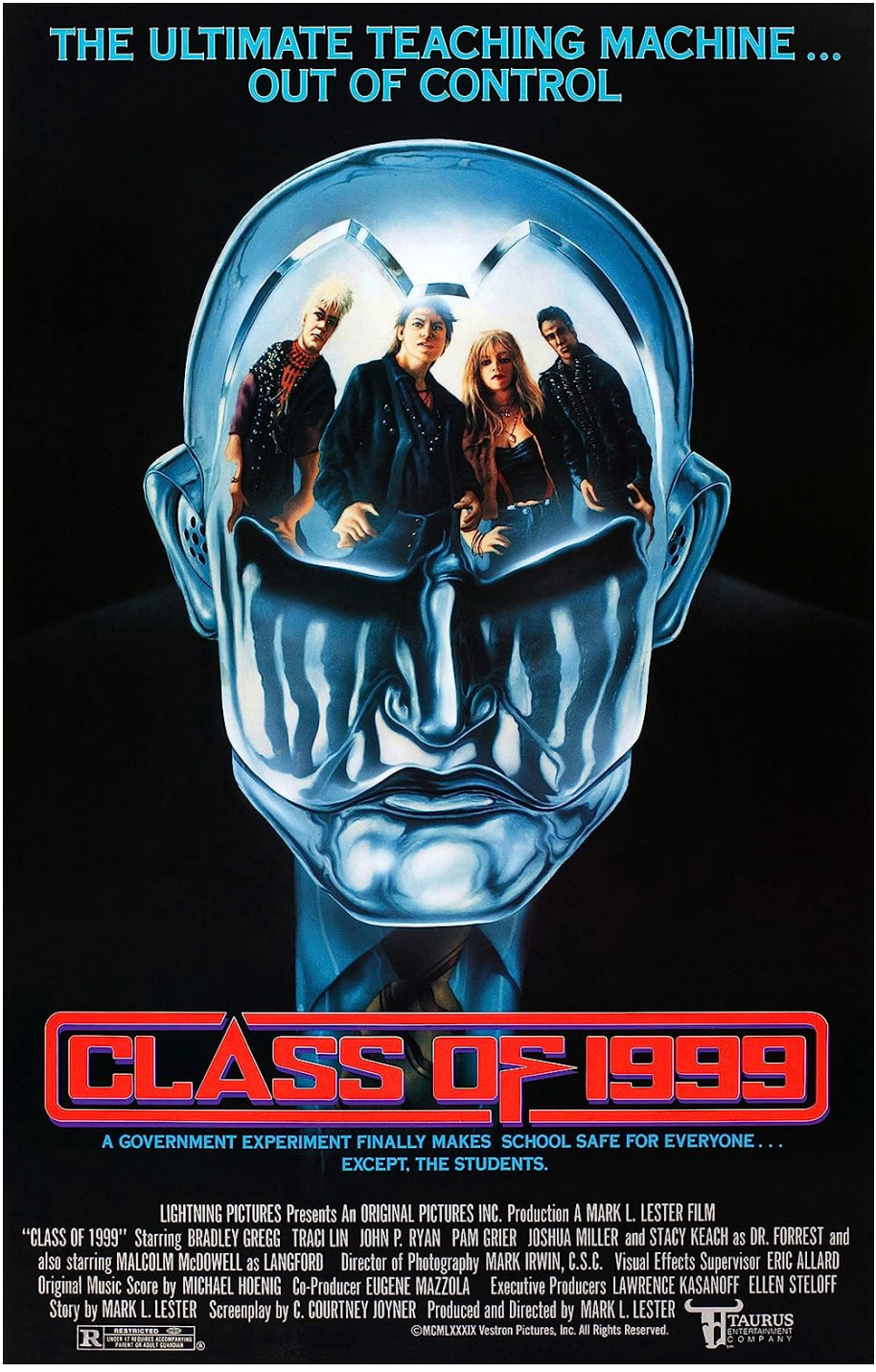
From one angle, there are no good guys or bad guys because we were all about to join the same side and we hadn't figured out who the next good guys and bad guys would be yet.

From another, the good guys and bad guys aren't really in the movie. It could be argued that Hackman plays a hero and Jones a villain, but in truth both only play tiny cogs in a giant machine. Had neither shown up to the shoot, the history books wouldn't read any different.

Instead, this becomes a stepping stone. It's an appropriate follow-up to *Above the Law*, the ending eerily similar with Gallagher naming names to rare honest politicians behind closed doors. And it's an appropriate pointer towards *The Fugitive*, with the leads sharing few scenes but Davis building incredible tension anyway.

But that's about it.

A Capita
Washington


THE ULTIMATE TEACHING MACHINE ...
OUT OF CONTROL
CLASS OF 1999
A GOVERNMENT EXPERIMENT FINALLY MAKES SCHOOL SAFE FOR EVERYONE . . .
EXCEPT, THE STUDENTS.
LIGHTNING PICTURES Presents An ORIGINAL PICTURES INC. Production A MARK L. LESTER FILM
"CLASS OF 1999" Starring BRADLEY GREGG TRACI LIN JOHN P. RYAN PAM GRIER JOSHUA MILLER and STACY KEACH as DR. FORREST and
also starring MALCOLM McDOWELL as LANGFORD Director of Photography MARK IRWIN, C.S.C. Visual Effects Supervisor ERIC ALLARD
Original Music Score by MICHAEL HOENIG Co-Producer EUGENE MAZZOLA Executive Producers LAWRENCE KASANOFF ELLEN STELOFF
Story by MARK L. LESTER Screenplay by C. COURTNEY JOYNER Produced and Directed by MARK L. LESTER
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TAURUS ENTERTAINMENT COMPANY

CLASS OF 1999 (1990)

DIRECTOR: MARK L. LESTER

WRITER: C. COURTNEY JOYNER

STARS: BRADLEY GREGG, TRACI LIN, JOHN P. RYAN, PAM GRIER, PATRICK KILPATRICK, JOSHUA MILLER, STACY KEACH AND MALCOLM MCDOWELL

There are a lot of cult movies to be found in Pam Grier's filmography, especially during the seventies when her forte was women in prison flicks and blaxploitation. I'd seen most of them before, but I hadn't seen her later cult films, 1981's *Fort Apache, the Bronx* and this 1990 gem.

I see the names on lists and I'm very happy that this project allowed me to catch up with them. Of all the films in the second half of her First Thirty, it's these, and *The Vindicator*, that I enjoyed most and am most likely to revisit.

This is the second in a trilogy of *Class* films that are only loosely connected. The original was 1982's *Class of 1984*, a cult film in its own right, then this and finally *Class of 1999 II: The Substitute*, which featured a few flashbacks to this film but was otherwise unrelated.

The common factor is that they're all set in a dystopian near future. Mass shootings didn't prompt police forces to emulate the military as they did in our world; instead they led to an abdication of effort. The Constitution has been abolished, private businesses are banned and control of cities has fallen to street gangs. Free fire zones now exist where the police have no jurisdiction and what little law enforcement happens is by the Department of Educational Defense, which is part of the C.I.A.

Kennedy High School in Seattle is located in the middle of a free fire zone and the D.E.D. is taking an innovative approach to martial law there. They're partnering with Dr. Bob Forrest of MegaTech, who looks and sounds utterly off his rocker but clearly has the clout to make a heck of a difference with his secret program, XT6, to deal with disciplinary problems.

What's XT6? Why, thank you for asking. It's where MegaTech repurposes humanoid robots previously used by the military into teachers. What could possibly go wrong, as they say?

Well, we expect everything to go wrong and for Dr. Bob to not care, given that Stacy Keach has white hair but a black moustache, a weird ponytail worthy of a credit of its own, a pair of bizarrely cheap contact lenses and a complete disconnect from human morality.

Now, it's well known that filmmakers can't make cult films on their own; the audience is needed to turn films into cult films. However, the presence of Stacy Keach in this form helps, as does Malcolm McDowell, as long suffering Kennedy High principal, Dr. Miles Langford.

How long suffering? Well, he has 3,287 kids in his school and 2,210 of those are members of gangs. Violent incidents happen every two and a half hours. Classes literally lock down at start time with hall monitors in body armour. There's only so much that the razorwire and guard posts can do, even if school buses have roll cages and weapons must be surrendered.

That's why there's Pam Grier, as one of a set of three new XT6 teaching robots. She's Miss

Connors, Patrick Kilpatrick is Mr. Bryles and John P. Ryan is Mr. Hardin. None of them will stand for any nonsense at all and can defend themselves impeccably.

For instance, chem class hasn't even started when some of the gang kids tell Miss Connors where to go. She tries verbal commands, then accelerates to physical punishment. They fall in line. Mr. Hardin operates on zero tolerance. When a fight breaks out in his history class, he goes right to physical punishment, spanking one combatant while standing on the other.

Mr. Bryles is the most unhinged of the three and he quickly causes the first death. The hero of the piece, Cody Culp, who's being let out of jail because he's honestly cleaned up his act, is quickly disciplined for saving the principal's daughter from being raped. Needless to say, Dr. Langford keeps that out of his record but Mr. Bryles keeps him after P.E. to wrestle him into submission. When Cody's friend Mohawk saves him with a gun, Bryles breaks his neck.

As the deaths add up, Dr. Langford begins to have second thoughts about this batshit crazy program but Dr. Forrest sees deaths as data. It seems the program is evolving faster than he expected. Stacy Keach is having so much fun, he even eats a banana as he talks about it.

I'm sure you can see where this is going, but it's all handled with the utmost sincerity and extreme firepower and both make it glorious fun. It's not hard to see why it's a cult film.

The good kids, which basically means Cody and the principal's daughter, Christie, plus a ragtag band of whoever is willing to tag along with them, want to save the day, so they break into the teachers' house seeking evidence that they're not what they seem.

The teachers, secure in their programming, escalate their violence to guarantee discipline, which quickly shifts from murder by reaction to murder as preventative maintenance. That expands the scope from the school to Seattle at large and suddenly we're in a gang war, the Razorheads vs. the Blackhearts, with the XT6 robots playing Yojimbo.

"They're waging war with my students?" asks Dr. Langford. "Isn't that what all teachers do?" replies Dr. Forrest.

It's fair that the kids are given the majority of screen time here, because this is their story, as much as it's anyone's, especially Cody. He's the lead in an action film, a redemption story, a family drama, a mystery and a romance, all inside what's a school story at heart wrapped up in science fiction clothing.

However, it's the teachers who are the most fun, because they're the antagonists. They're not really the villains, because they're subject to their programming and that's the work of Dr. Forrest, who we recognise as the villain as soon as we see his ponytail. The teachers are the ones kicking ass and taking names though, and all three of these actors have a blast.

Pam Grier takes being shot with automatic weapons as a thrill and a challenge. She's been eviscerated so naturally turns her hand into a flamethrower and takes on all comers. It's wild and wacky and wonderful and she obviously had a whale of a time shooting it.

I don't know that Grier has any particular fondness for films like *The Vindicator* and *Class of 1999* that seem to be designed to be watched on VHS tapes rented from Blockbuster in good company with plenty of pizza and beer. They gave her the opportunity to utterly dominate scenes, though, and that must have felt like a freeing experience in a decade that tended to relegate her to bit parts and nothing roles.

So here's to cult film craziness!

Once...They Made History.
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Bill & Ted's
Bogus
Journey
IT'S A TRIP.
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BILL & TED'S BOGUS JOURNEY (1991)

DIRECTOR: PETE HEWITT

WRITER: CHRIS MATHESON & ED SOLOMON

STARS: KEANU REEVES, ALEX WINTER,
WILLIAM SADLER, JOSS ACKLAND, PAM GRIER AND GEORGE CARLIN

Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure is one of my favourite movies. It holds an underlying truth even though it's utterly ridiculous throughout and it's pure unadulterated fun. I've gone back to it often since the eighties and it always hits the spot for me.

When I put together the list of Pam Grier's First Thirty, I was surprised to find that a) she was even in that film's sequel, *Bill & Ted's Bogus Journey*, as I had zero recollection of her in it and b) that I haven't gone back to it once since it came out. I was suddenly very worried about how it would hold up, not least because the much delayed third film in the series, *Bill & Ted Face the Music*, is truly awful, however amazing Brigette Lundy-Paine was as Ted's daughter.

What I found was that it's very much stuck between the two, not a patch on the original but much better than the third. It's a triumph of the imagination, with most praise going to the writers, Chris Matheson & Ed Solomon, as they deconstruct and reconstruct not just the Bill & Ted mythos but cinematic history with *The Seventh Seal* a particularly key template.

They ratchet up the silliness even further and most of the best bits work simply because they went there, wherever there is from a list of "wouldn't it be cool if" moments that I'd be shocked weren't generated using recreational drugs. Eventually, however, the sheer weight of its cleverness prompts it to collapse in on itself, so I'm unlikely to go back to it again any time soon, but I'm happy to have acquired fresh memories of this bit and that one and especially the other bit over there.

For anyone who doesn't know this trilogy, the idea is that the music of a pair of slacker nobodies in San Dimas, California, namely Bill S. Preston, Esq. and Ted "Theodore" Logan, is destined to turn the world into a utopia. The catch is that their band, Wyld Stallyns, sucks, because neither of them know how to play and they can't be bothered to learn. So how does a band save the world with that attitude?

Film one saw a positive interruption to their lives when Rufus arrives in his phone box time machine to help them pass a history class. The ramifications of failure to them just mean Ted being sent to military school but to Rufus the eradication of his utopian future. So they whiz through time collecting historical figures for their class presentation, from Socrates to Joan of Arc via Genghis Khan.

Film two sees a negative interruption, with a future terrorist, Chuck De Nomolos stealing a phone box time machine to send evil robot replicas of Bill & Ted back to San Dimas to kill the real ones and purge his future of what he sees as needless frivolity. The first neat touch of many is that they quickly succeed.

First, however, we meet Pam Grier, as Ms. Wardroe, the organiser of a Battle of the Bands

at the San Dimas Civic Auditorium. She allows Wyld Stallyns to compete even though they're awful. "Prepare a little," she suggests and then vanishes from the movie until the finalé.

The point, of course, is that this is another crucial moment in time. Wyld Stallyns have to win this Battle of the Bands, but everything is against them, from their lack of discipline and talent to Evil Bill & Ted literally hurling them off a cliff to their deaths twenty-five minutes into the film.

It's here that the real imagination kicks in, because of course the movie doesn't end then. They wake up dead to be faced with the Grim Reaper, but escape by giving him a wedgie. "I can't believe we just melvined Death!"

However, they're sucked down to their own personal Hells until they realise that the only way to end it is to play Death at a game. Even if you haven't seen *The Seventh Seal* (in which case, remedy that as soon as possible), you're aware of the knight playing chess with Death to stay alive. Now apply that to Bill & Ted and we find our heroes triumphant over the Grim Reaper at Battleships, Clue and Twister. And so they will live again.

However, they still need help, so the Grim Reaper takes them to Heaven, where we spend more time recognising background characters than following the plot. It was at this point that I realised how much I was enjoying this but also how problematic it all was.

So many of the moments are wonderful and I adored that they just kept on happening in ways that most filmmakers wouldn't have the balls to do, something that extends to how the film was cast. Placing Jim Martin of Faith No More alongside Johann Sebastian Bach is just genius, as is having Taj Mahal play St. Peter.

However, the broader story linking all those moments is skimpy and stupid and missing all the charm that saved the first picture. In that film, it was all about Bill & Ted. In this one, too much of it isn't and every scene without them suffers for it. In that film, we were with them all the way. In this one, maybe not so much. In that film, the pivotal moment had some scary ramifications, because we didn't want Ted to be sent to military school. In this one, losing at a Battle of the Bands doesn't compare. Sure, it would have the same negative effect on future civilisation but that's not personal for us.

And so this feels clever and innovative and daring and so many moments are glorious, but it fails quickly and consistently to emulate the success of the first movie. No wonder it failed at the box office. No wonder it became a cult hit. No wonder they eventually made the third film and we quickly wished they hadn't.

But hey, this is Pam Grier's First Thirty. I'm not talking much about her at all because, as was generally the case in the eighties, she had a small supporting part. However, as was also generally the case in the eighties, it's a pivotal one, as we eventually discover when it turns out that she's actually Rufus in disguise.

Does that explain the huge wig that makes her look far more like Tina Turner than Pam Grier? Probably not, but that does explain why I forgot she was in the movie. She looks great but she doesn't look like her.

And so that's it for Pam Grier's First Thirty. She rocked the seventies, not always landing lead roles but often doing so and making a serious impact even if not. However, she was left behind by the eighties, unfairly relegated to supporting roles, only occasionally with an opportunity to truly shine.

Arguably, that wouldn't change until *Jackie Brown*, film #39, which was seven years away.

SUBMISSIONS

I welcome submissions to Apocalypse Later Music, though I can't guarantee that everything submitted will be reviewed.

Please read the following important notes before submitting anything.

I primarily review the good stuff. There's just too much of it out there nowadays to waste any time reviewing the bad stuff. Almost everything that I review is, in my opinion, either good or interesting and, hopefully, both. I believe that it's worth listening to and I recommend it to some degree, if it happens to be your sort of thing. Now, if you're a die hard black/death metalhead, you might not dig any of the psychedelic rock and vice versa. However, maybe you will! Open ears, open minds and all that.

I have zero interest in being a hatchet man critic who slams everything he writes about. I'll only give a bad review if it's in the public interest, such as a major act releasing a disappointing album. Even then, I'll often keep away.

If I do review, I'll still be completely honest and point out the good and the bad in any release.

I'm primarily reviewing new material only. Each month at Apocalypse Later Music, I review releases from the previous two months. I might stretch a little beyond that for a submission, but not far. Each January, I also try to catch up with highly regarded albums and obvious omissions from the previous year that I didn't get round to at the time. I then bundle my reviews up at the end of a quarter and publish in zine form midway through the following month.

I'm especially interested in studio albums or EPs that do something new and different. I try to review an indie release and a major band each weekday, one rock and one metal, with each week deliberately varied in both genres and countries covered.

If you still want to submit, thank you! You can do so in a couple of ways:

1. Digital copy: please e-mail me at hal@hornsablaze.com a link to where I can download mp3s in 320k. Please include promotional material such as an EPK, high res cover art, etc.
2. Physical: e-mail me for a mailing address.

Either way but especially digitally, please include any promotional material such as a press kit, high res cover art, band photo, etc.

And, whether you submit or not and whether I liked it or not, all the best with your music! Don't quit! The world is a better place because you create.

Submissions of books for review at the Nameless Zine wouldn't come to me directly. If you have books that fit the scope of a predominantly science fiction/fantasy/horror e-zine, please see the contact details at the bottom of the main page at thenamelesszine.org.

I don't review film submissions much any more, as most of my film reviews are for books.

CREATIVE COMMONS

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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 watches anything unusual and much that isn't. 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

My personal site is Dawtrina. I run Smithland, a Guy N. Smith fan site. I founded and co-run the CoKoCon science fiction/fantasy convention. I co-founded the Arizona Penny Dreadfuls. I've run the Awesomelys since 2013. I write for the Nameless Zine.

The Arizona Penny Dreadfuls	azpennydreadfuls.org
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Dawtrina	dawtrina.com
The Nameless Zine	thenamelesszine.org
Smithland	guynsmith.rocks

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 and it stuck. It didn't have to be funny.

Gradually he focused on writing at length about the sort of films that most critics don't, such as old films, foreign films, indie films, local films, microbudget films, and so on, always avoiding adverts, syndication and monetised links, not to forget the eye-killing horror of white text on a black background. Let's just get to the content and make it readable.

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, Arizona, 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 celebrated its fifteenth anniversary in 2022.

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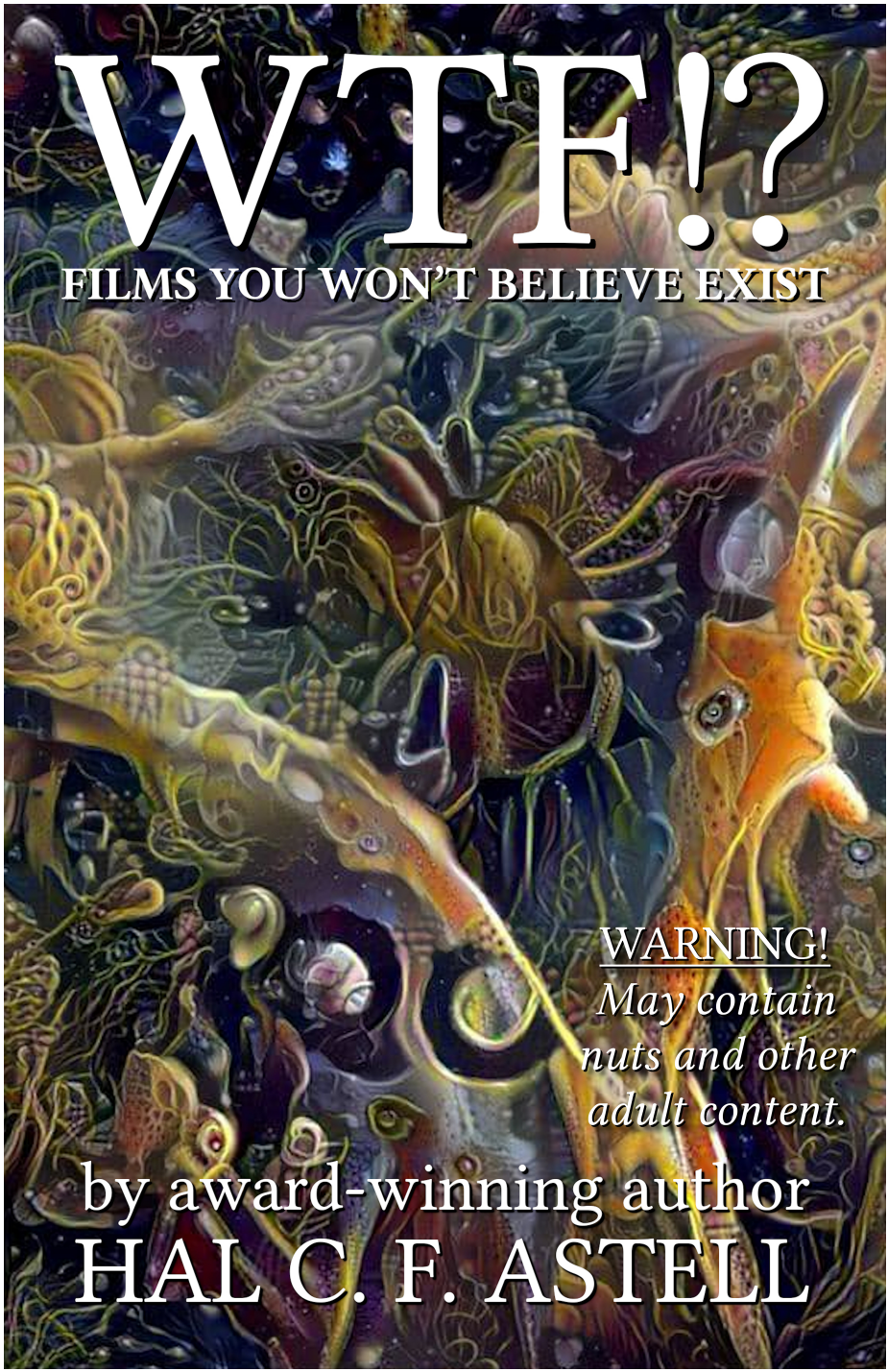
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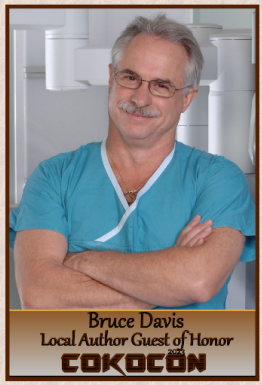

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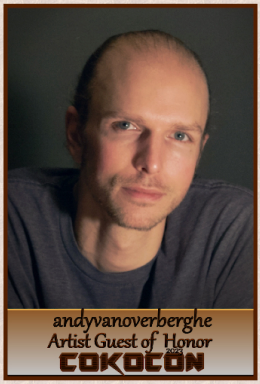

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In the seventies, she was the Queen of Women in Prison and the true pioneer of kick ass women in blaxploitation. In the eighties, well, she wasn't, as she struggled to find substantial parts but did amazing work anyway.

She's Pam Grier and film critic Hal C. F. Astell runs through her First Thirty movies, from *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls* to *Bill & Ted's Bogus Journey* to see how her career developed.

Apocalypse Later Press
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