

SHOCK TREATMENT

Directed by Jim Sharman
(1981) Arrow Video Blu-ray
(region B import)

Following up on the unexpected mammoth midnight circuit hit *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, Richard O'Brien was in a bit of a quandary in terms of how to match its cult success. A proposed direct sequel—*Rocky Horror Shows His Heels*—was cast aside after director Jim Sharman realized it was too close to the original. Songs were recycled, with another effort scripted—*The Brad & Janet Show*. It was further refined into *Shock Treatment*, with one last (crucial) change necessitated by a writer's strike. Filming was to take place in Denton, TX and capitalize on all of its Americana, but then moved to England. Trimming one million off the budget, O'Brien and Co. hit upon the idea of setting the proceedings in a bubble: Denton, U.S.A, a reality-show universe housed inside of a soundstage.

After an elaborate musical number ("Denton, USA"), we're re-introduced to *Rocky Horror's* Brad & Janet (now played by Jessica Harper and Cliff De Young), now married, as they're ushered into the soundstage to view eccentric television host Bert Schnick (Barry Humphries, aka: Dame Edna). Brad will soon be committed to a mental hospital, thanks to town magnate Farley Flavors (also De Young), while Janet once again gets the opportunity to vamp as she's made a televisual superstar in Denton.

Richard O'Brien and Patricia Quinn have sizable roles as Doctors and siblings—Cosmo and Nation McKinley. They keep close quarters on the incapacitated Brad as Janet is fashioned and groomed for stardom.

Other familiar supporting players include Rik Mayall ("Rest Home" Ricky), Charles Gray (as a Judge), and Little Nell (as Nurse Ansalong, and also Columbia in *Rocky Horror*). Beside the characters of Brad & Janet, Ralph Hapschatt (Jeremy Newson) is the only other featured to return, but—as in *Rocky Horror*—isn't particularly central to the film.

20th Century Fox took a chance on an unlikely idea: the creator of the *Rocky Horror Picture Show* on a bold new idea, with no real character crossover minus the milquetoast protagonist Brad and Janet. It's not a direct sequel, but another whimsical musical with otherworldly elements.

There are some great musical numbers—"Lullaby", the title song, "Little Black Dress"—that hold up to the memorable numbers of the original *Rocky Horror* stage production. They're just as poppy and catchy.

On the casting front, Susan Sarandon was now a star, and though apparently entertained the idea, she ultimately wanted far too much money. *Phantom of the Paradise* and *Suspiria's* Jessica Harper gets the coveted role of Janet instead; and she's a much better singer (as *Paradise* and "Old Souls" can attest).

Cliff De Young was the number one pick for the role of Brad in the original musical show, but a television series contract kept him out of it. Again, Barry Bostwick was too busy, so De Young gets the role of Brad. De Young also has a double role as town magnate Farley Flavors—the man who runs Denton; De Young apparently based him off of the mannerisms of Jack Nicholson.

Sure, there's no Tim Curry, but other than Barry Humphries' eccentric personality of Bert Schnick, which role would he have been suited for? *Rocky Horror* always seemed to be a love-hate thing for Curry (making it amazing he took part in the role Charles Gray originated in the live remake last year on Fox).

The film revels in its early eighties-ness, bright and eye-popping color, as opposed to the dark-and-stormy-night atmosphere that permeates the unusual musical that encapsulates *Rocky Horror*. *Shock Treatment* is a worthy follow-up, but not its "equal" as O'Brien once stated during production and initial publicity, but quickly backtracked on. ("An abortion" is the definitive word you'll find online about his thoughts on it subsequently.)

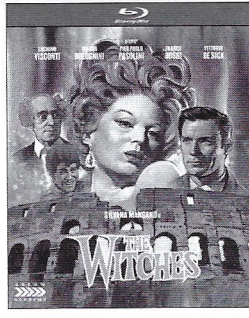
O'Brien on *Shock Treatment* is unfortunately not in the Arrow Blu-ray cards, but in addition to the fan commentary (from a decade ago), there's a new track by co-stars Quinn and Little Nell. Original DVD supplements—a 17-minute retrospective doc on the film and an additional one on the music (6 minutes)—are included, but the majority of extras are fan-related and fan-supported. They've taken on the mantle.

O'Brien is a peculiar genius and distinctive songwriter with a penchant for otherworldly fantasylands that feel like nothing else. *Shock Treatment* is another slice, and the Arrow UK Blu-ray (despite reports of some shoddy packaging), is its last word.

And, thankfully, it's complete: Arrow has reinstated the complete overture during the closing credits, and include the full O'Brien version of the track "Shock Treatment".

(Fun note for soundtrack collectors: This version also wasn't on the full-length LP, but only on a 45! It's a great track.)

Aaron Graham



THE WITCHES

Directed by Luchino Visconti,
Pier Paolo Pasolini, Mauro Bolognini,
Franco Rossi, and Vittorio de Sica
(1967) Arrow Academy Blu-ray

Despite its title there are no witches in *The Witches*, and only mild suggestions of the supernatural can be found in any of this anthology film's five segments. But don't let that deter you. *The Witches* is well worth your time.

The film was conceived by producer Dino De Laurentiis as a showcase for his wife, actress Sylvia Mangano, who tuned heads around the world in *Bitter Rice* (1949) and was re-establishing her career after taking time off to bear the couple's first two children. *The Witches* collects short films (ranging in length from 17 to 40 minutes) directed by legends Luchino Visconti, Pier Paolo Pasolini, and Vittorio de Sica, along with brief anecdotes by Mauro Bolognini and Franco Rossi (running six and five minutes, respectively).

Most of the stories are broadly comedic. The lone exception is Visconti's "The Witch Burned Alive," which stars Mangano as a movie star visiting an old friend for an overnight party at her mountain chalet. Instead of a relaxing retreat, the event turns into a grueling ordeal that reveals how fame has objectified and dehumanized the actress. "You're a product," a fellow guest tells her. He later compares her with canned meat. The rest of the party goes, including her longtime friends and even her husband (who she speaks to over the phone), are all angling to take something from her. When she falls ill, they gleefully strip away her trappings of glamour. It's a powerful, deeply moving story, beautifully played by Mangano, and easily the best of the movie's five tales. I agree with audio commentator Tim Lucas, however, that it was a misstep to begin the film with this sequence, since nothing that follows can live up to it. Also, the devastating conclusion of "The Witch Burned Alive" would play more powerfully at the end of the film. Instead, it's undercut by the silly vignette that follows it ("Civic Spirit" by Bolognini, about a woman who offers a ride to a car crash victim, so she can speed through traffic on her way to a date).

The next, and next-best, segment is Pasolini's "The Earth as Seen from the Moon," which co-stars Mangano with esteemed Italian clown Toto (in one of his final film appearances) and Ninetto Davoli. They play Ciancicato and Baciù, a grieving husband and son who decide to woo a new wife and mother for their bedraggled family. Early attempts go poorly (among the first potential brides they approach are a prostitute and a mannequin), but eventually they meet Absurdity (Mangano), a deaf-mute woman of devout faith and superhuman homemaking skills. She seems to be the ideal wife and mother, but things go awry when Ciancicato involves her in an ill-fated scheme to raise money for a better house. Billed as "a fairy tale written by Pier Paolo Pasolini," this short is literally cartoonish: broadly played slapstick with over-the-top performances, exaggerated makeup and sets, and a story that could have originated with Chuck Jones. It's like nothing else in Pasolini's filmography, and is intriguing for that reason, but it's only intermittently funny, and at around 30 minutes it rambles on a bit too long.

Rossi's brief, sardonic "The Sicilian Belle" casts Mangano as a petulant young woman whose false accusations against a young man trigger a blood feud that wipes out the entire male population of her village.

The final major segment is De Sica's "An Evening Like the Others," which co-stars Mangano and Clint Eastwood as couple whose marriage has slipped into malaise. Eastwood is cast against type as a milquetoast salaryman. His bored, frustrated wife drifts into elaborate flights of fancy. Like a hypersexualized Walter Mitty, she fantasizes about being passed around by hunky super-heroes and of performing a strip-tease in front of a stadium full of men, imagining that her husband's jealousy will reignite his passion for her. It's an amusing short, and the only one aside from Visconti's that gives Mangano anything interesting to do. Eastwood also comes off well, revealing a sweetness and vulnerability seldom seen in his early work.

In an unusual move, all five directors worked with the same crew, including cinematographer Giuseppe Rotunno, whose work is superb throughout. The film's five chapters vary in quality, but they all look beautiful. The picture also boasts a jazzy, infectious score composed primarily by Piero Piccioni (the Pasolini segment is scored by Ennio Morricone).

According to Lucas, *The Witches* never received a U.S. theatrical release. Until now, it had never received a proper stateside home video release either, although it has kicked around in poor quality gray market versions. Arrow rescues the movie from obscurity with this pristine 2K remaster from the original interpositive, with uncompressed mono audio. *The Witches* is offered in both its Italian and English language versions with removable English subtitles. About seven minutes of footage were edited out of the English cut, but this version enables viewers to hear Eastwood's voice (he was dubbed for the Italian release). Bonus features include an interview with actor Ninetto Davoli and Lucas' commentary.

The Witches may be too offbeat to merit a general recommendation, but it's certainly worth seeing for students of classic Italian cinema (and especially for acolytes of Visconti or Pasolini), or for Eastwood completists.

Mark Clark