

REISSUES



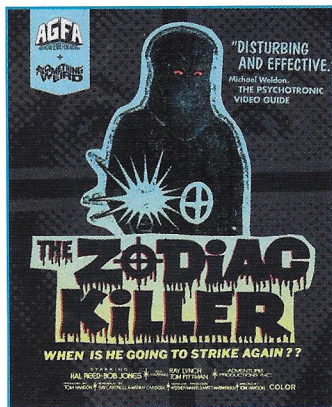
HOW TO CATCH A KILLER

THE ZODIAC KILLER (1971) Blu-ray

Starring Hal Reed, Bob Jones and Ray Lynch
Written and directed by Tom Hanson
AGFA/Something Weird/MVD

Hats off to the American Genre Film Archive for launching a series of Blu-rays showcasing titles from the Something Weird library of horror/exploitation obscurities. This debut release is more notable for its history than its quality, but its back story is fascinating: as AGFA's Joe Ziemba notes on the commentary track, it was the first horror film ever made to catch an at-large serial killer.

When *The Zodiac Killer* opened in San Francisco, where the eponymous fiend committed one of his crimes, writer/director Tom Hanson had cops staked out in and around the theatre, figuring the maniac would want to check out his own screen story. Though the movie is lacking in both craft and pace, it does carry a certain lurid fascination, as Hanson establishes a couple of insanely misogynistic protagonists as potential



Zodiacs, revealing one to be the villain before the halfway point. The details of his exploits hew closely to the facts for about the first hour before diverting from reality; perhaps Hanson expected the actual Zodiac to blurt out, "That's not what happened!" from his seat?

It's easy to believe the writer/director's claim that he wrote the *Zodiac Killer* in a day and a half, and it's not exactly elevated by its cast. Yet it's a must-see for connoisseurs of vintage slashers and true-crime flicks, and this Blu-ray is exactly the sort of cinematic time capsule that makes AGFA and Something Weird an invaluable alliance.

Complementing the transfer, which is pretty sharp considering it was derived from the only surviving 16-to-35mm blowup print, is a wealth of extras. Between the commentary (on which Ziemba is joined by AGFA's Sebastian del Castillo, and then Hanson and Manny Nedwick), the featurette and liner notes, we learn the full stranger-than-fiction saga of the film and its higher purpose. The talk track reveals entertaining production stories, though the best parts are Hanson's recollections of that SF

booking and a frightening guy he encountered as a result. Also included is the 1977 flick *Another Son of Sam* which, unlike its co-feature, actually has nothing to do with its namesake maniac.

MICHAEL GINGOLD

NERDS AND RATS:
A LOVE STORY

WILLARD (1971) Blu-ray

Starring Bruce Davison, Ernest Borgnine and Sondra Locke
Directed by Daniel Mann
Written by Gilbert A. Raiston

BEN (1972) Blu-ray

Starring Lee Montgomery, Joseph Campanella and Meredith Baxter
Directed by Phil Karlson
Written by Gilbert A. Raiston
Scream Factory

Needing a nibble on some rodent revenge? Here's your chance to scratch out *Willard* and *Ben* via Scream Factory's reissues on Blu-ray.

Willard (Bruce Davison) is one stressed-out guy. Forced to care for his ailing mother (*Bride of Frankenstein's* Elsa Lanchester), he is lonely and under pressure from his dick of a boss, Al (Ernest Borgnine). When Willard befriends Ben, a rat living in his house, his thoughts soon turn to vengeance and Willard winds up coaxing hordes of rats to commit burglary and murder.

Davison's performance is more subdued than Crispin Glover's unhinged take in the 2003 remake, but it allows his character to build to the manic climax. And it's always great to have a scenery-chewing Borgnine, who brings a gruff energy to whatever scene he thumps into. The sequel, *Ben*, sees the runaway rat (and company) befriend a new boy Danny (Lee Montgomery) and helping him deal with some bullies. The expected chaos ensues, and director Karlson plays this one up as a more traditional creature feature, with additional scenes of marauding rat mayhem, and it's all the better for it.

While neither film is truly horrifying (except for those suffering from a severe case of murophobia), they're consistently entertaining. There's also a surprising amount of talent in the mix: for the music, composer Alex North (*Spartacus*) turns in a lovely score for *Willard*, while *Ben* fea-

