

They were out for blood and rotten to the core.  
Now they're back...



The Vegetables of Doom!



# RETURN OF THE KILLER TOMATOES

## CAST

**ANTHONY STARKE** as Chad  
**GEORGE CLOONEY** as Matt  
**KAREN MISTAL** as Tara  
**STEVE LUNDQUIST** as Igor  
**JOHN ASTIN** as Professor Gangreen  
**J. STEPHEN PEACE** (aka "ROCK" PEACE) as Wilbur Finletter

## CREW

Directed by **JOHN DE BELLO**  
Produced by **J. STEPHEN PEACE**  
Written by **CONSTANTINE DILLON, J. STEPHEN PEACE**  
and **JOHN DE BELLO**  
Director of Photography **STEPHEN KENT WELCH**  
Edited by **STEPHEN F. ANDRICH** and **JOHN DE BELLO**  
Music by **RICK PATTERSON** and **NEAL FOX**





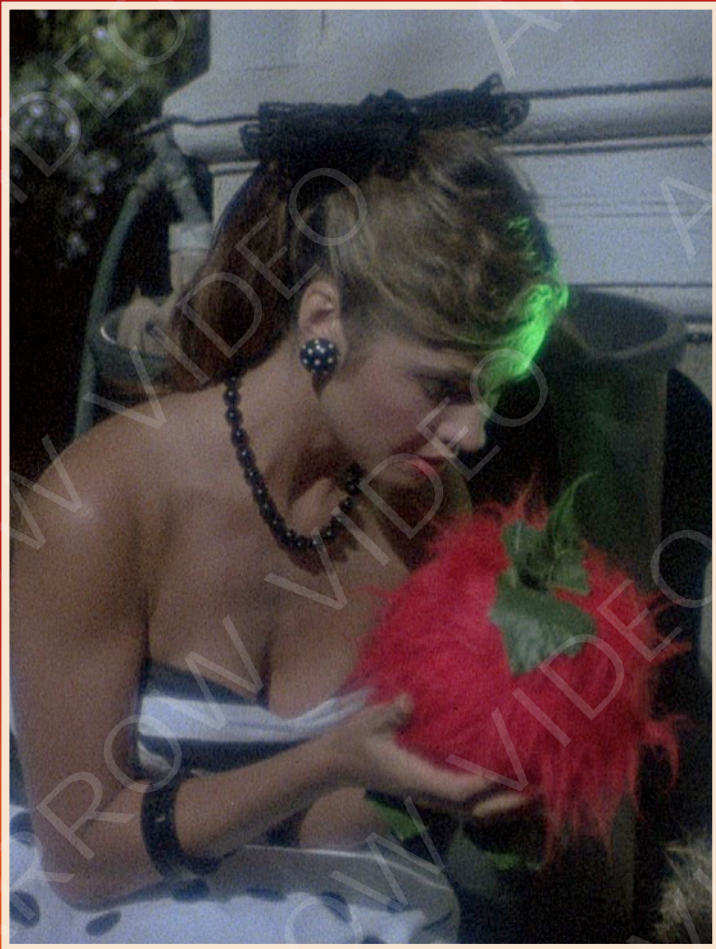
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## 100% FRESH

THE RIPE, JUICY GOODNESS OF RETURN OF THE KILLER TOMATOES!

by James Oliver

It will come as a surprise to exactly no one that cinema has so rarely explored the sinister side of salad. Even in the 1950s, that golden age of dodgy science-fiction – when Edward Davis Wood Jr. was in his pomp, when movies pretended radiation could turn even the most ordinary objects into threats against humanity and when, for heaven's sake, producers honestly thought they could get away with a movie in which the US army are menaced by an irritable tree (*From Hell It Came*, 1957) – even then, no filmmaker tried imperilling the world with the contents of a supermarket vegetable aisle.

So it might sound like only the faintest praise to call *Return of the Killer Tomatoes!* the very greatest film ever made about ferocious fruit. But although it *is* the very greatest film ever made about ferocious fruit, it is also a good deal more.

It is a comedy, of course; unlike questionably premised sci-fi films of an earlier epoch, the laughs here are intentional. And, as the title makes plain, it's a sequel. Its progenitor, *Attack of the Killer Tomatoes!*, was made in 1978. Although obviously inspired by 1950s creature features, *Attack* isn't actually much interested in traditional parody; influenced by Monty Python and Mel Brooks, it's something shaggier, more free-form. You want to know what it's like? Well, the clips reprised for the sequel give a fair idea of that.

It might be usefully compared to another low-budget movie-informed, Monty Python/Mel Brooks-influenced comedy made around at the same time, *The Kentucky Fried Movie* (1977). But while *The Kentucky Fried Movie* was a modest hit – big enough to promote director John Landis to the big leagues with *National Lampoon's Animal House* (1978), *The Blues Brothers* (1980) and *An American Werewolf in London* (1981), and give writers Jim Abrahams, David Zucker and Jerry Zucker a shot at their own movie (*Airplane!*, 1980) – *Attack of the Killer*



*Tomatoes!* was strictly a cult proposition, both in movie houses and later on VHS.

And there the story would have ended had it not been for a surprising bit of cross-referencing: *Muppet Babies* (1984-1991) was a largely animated show that liked to incorporate live-action sequences taken from movies. One 1986 episode – ‘The Weirdo Zone’<sup>1</sup> – used clips from *Attack of the Killer Tomatoes!*: Fozzie Bear is attacked by some ‘silly’ tomatoes for telling bad jokes. (SPOILER WARNING: he traps them in a large ketchup bottle. Wakka Wakka!) ‘The Weirdo Zone’ was a popular episode – the most popular episode of *Muppet Babies*, in fact<sup>2</sup>, sufficiently well-liked to stimulate a whole new interest in *Attack of the Killer Tomatoes!*

This was enough to encourage New World Pictures, a leading purveyor of modestly-budgeted genre fare, to get in touch with John De Bello, director of *Attack of the Killer Tomatoes!*. Would he and his colleagues consider making a sequel, they asked. Such a thing had not been on their agenda but since they asked so nicely... Better still, New World were offering respectable money. For all the gags about the parsimony of the production, the actual budget for *Return of the Killer Tomatoes!* was a relatively comfortable \$2 million.

Accordingly, the resultant film was more confident and ambitious than the spit ‘n’ sawdust original, with a more disciplined script: as Chad and Matt boast in the climactic showdown, everything that is set up in the first reel pays off later on. Moreover, the jokes have become much more pointed; long before most other folks had woken up to the cultural crassness of the 1980s – everything from the jingoistic politics to the terrible music production – *Return of the Killer Tomatoes!* had already identified some of the worst tendencies of the decade and mocked them accordingly.

The film takes a particularly waspish view of the state of movies at the tail end

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1 - *Muppet Babies* episode 303, first shown 27/09/86. This might be the very first time that *Muppet Babies* has been cited in a footnote; not a landmark to be especially proud of.

2 - “Attack of the Killer Tomatoes: An Oral History of the 1978 Film” - <http://www.bonappetit.com/entertaining-style/pop-culture/article/attack-of-the-killer-tomatoes-an-oral-history-of-the-1978-film>

of the Reagan years. Chad has posters for *Raging Bull* (1980) and *High Noon* (1952) on the walls of his apartment, surely chosen to exemplify the sort of relatively nuanced film that Hollywood had abandoned in favour of high concept blockbusters and steroid-assisted heroics: in most ‘80s films, the heroes would have looked more like the pneumatic oafs that Gangreen uses as guard dogs rather than the weedy, if good hearted, Chad.

The film is none too complimentary about other Hollywood business practices either; after George Lucas had accrued a second fortune from kids spending their pocket money on *Star Wars* toys, studios became ever more obsessed with merchandising opportunities, even letting them inform creative choices. There’s no better comment on all this than at the end of *Return of the Killer Tomatoes!* where the kids line up to get their hands on the cuddly FT dolls, and the audience is induced to do the same.

(FT himself seems to owe something to Gizmo, the impossibly cute Mogwai from *Gremlins* [1984], and this might have been one of the films that De Bello and his fellow screenwriters Constantine Dillon and J. Stephen Peace had in their sights. However, although it was produced by Steven Spielberg, a man much accused of altering scripts to maximise merchandising, *Gremlins* is actually one of the most subversive studio films of the 1980s, with director Joe Dante fully indulging his taste for disruption and anarchy.

(Incidentally, in 1990, two years after *Return of the Killer Tomatoes!*, Dante made *Gremlins 2: The New Batch*. Like *Return of the Killer Tomatoes!*, it breaks the fourth wall when Gremlins sabotage a cinema showing of the film, there’s a TV show that presents old movies, just like the *One Dollar Movie* show here and it even – briefly – includes a turn by John Astin, Professor Gangreen himself. Hmm.)

De Bello and his colleagues certainly don’t bother to hide the dim view they have of how the wider culture has evolved since the Great Tomato War. This is most obvious in what is (probably) the film’s funniest running gag in which objects previously wrapped in generic packaging – like ‘Detergent’ and ‘Cola’ – are replaced by full-on product placement, supposedly to subsidise the film’s



depleted budget. It's another broadside against the cynicism of producers who allow pecuniary advantage to dictate creative decisions: the '80s were when product placement exploded, when logos and branding flowered on screen as never before – think E.T. with his Reese's Pieces or Tom Cruise, well paid to wear Ray-Bans in *Risky Business* (1983) and *Top Gun* (1986).

*Return of the Killer Tomatoes!* wasn't the first film to call bullshit on the by-now ubiquitous product placement – *Repo Man* (1984) had, for instance, already used generic packaging as a raised middle finger against the excesses of consumerism (and had used the same colour scheme that's featured here). But the satire in evidence here is as effective as any in '80s cinema, ramping it up and pushing it to absurdity to show how prevalent this pernicious practice had become, and how it was affecting film.

Within the context of the movie, this product placement comes at the suggestion of George Clooney. Modern audiences might find this a moment of unusual prescience, for these days Gorgeous George funds his well-publicised philanthropic endeavours in North Africa and elsewhere by shilling for A Well-Known Brand of Coffee (which, since they haven't paid me, shall not be mentioned here), a Well-Known Brand of Coffee manufactured, as it happens, by Nestlé – the same Nestlé who manufacture the Crunch bars that he pimps on screen here: life imitating art, eh?

Clooney, of course, was just a jobbing young actor when he was cast in *Return of the Killer Tomatoes!* – this was only his second significant film gig, but it's not hindsight to say that he's really very good: check out his deadpan as Chad tries using Gangreen's machine to transform tomatoes. To his eternal credit, Clooney has always refused to bad mouth any of his early work, probably remembering how grateful he was for the work back then. But he can be legitimately proud of his association with *Return of the Killer Tomatoes!*

Indeed, it's not being facetious to say it remains one of the better films Clooney has appeared in, up there with the best of those made when he was in a position to pick and choose his employments. It is genuinely witty, and considerably more intelligent than the (purposefully) dumb title might suggest. It isn't simply

that the film makes satirical points about the state of movies in the rah-rah '80s, it's that it is able to connect these to the wider culture.

If *Attack of the Killer Tomatoes!* nodded to the then-recent Watergate wrongdoings (the human villain, Jim Richardson, was a corrupt White House aide) then this film reminds us of the great American political scandal of the 1980s, the Iran-Contra affair: the prison where the still-villainous Richardson is incarcerated is named after Colonel Oliver North, one of the key players in that particular imbroglio.

It's worth noting that J. Stephen Peace, who co-wrote the film, appears in it as Wilbur Finletter and even produced too, would subsequently serve in both the California State Assembly and the Californian Senate; since he is a Democrat, any liberal bias the film displays is, presumably, entirely intentional. Its rejection of the excesses of its own time are one of the reasons that the film has endured as well as it has – it is as detached from, and as cynical about, mainstream 1980s culture as most people are today: no mean feat given that it dates from an age when men sported mullets without any irony whatsoever.

Not that its detachment and cynicism helped it at the box office at the time. Like its predecessor, *Return of the Killer Tomatoes!* was never much more than a cult concern, albeit on a more substantial scale. Still, it was financially successful enough for the tomatoes to roll on for another few films; in the manner of those James Bond films that trail the super-spy's next mission, the credits of *Return of the Killer Tomatoes!* tease that the next instalment would take place in France.

As it was, *les tomates* had to wait before they could splatter Paris: the next film was actually *Killer Tomatoes Strike Back!* (De Bello, 1990), again with John Astin as the nefarious Gangreen. He would reappear in the eventual *Killer Tomatoes Eat France!* (De Bello, 1991), although that proved to be the final instalment in the sequence.

The tomatoes had other outings besides films: in a most pleasing bit of symmetry, a franchise that was revived after the involvement of a children's cartoon (those *Muppet Babies*, remember) actually went on to spawn a cartoon



of its own that ran for two seasons in 1990/1991. Although it was called *Attack of the Killer Tomatoes!*, it actually followed on from the events of *Return of the Killer Tomatoes!*, with a (re-voiced) Chad and Tara battling Gangreen, still played, as ever, by John Astin.

Since this is the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there's even been talk of a remake. And who knows – the results might actually be worthwhile, especially if they lay into the whole conveyor belt of remakes with the same gusto that the original took on the scourges of merchandising and product placement. But as long as the original is still available, any remake, revamp or re-imagination would have to work mighty hard to escape the shadow of its inspiration: this is one of the smartest, not to mention funniest film of its time. Almost enough to make you wish there were more films about killer fruit.

Almost.

*James Oliver is a writer, film historian and filmmaker. He likes films about pirates.*



## ABOUT THE TRANSFER

*Return of the Killer Tomatoes!* is presented in its original aspect ratio of 1.85:1 with its original mono mix soundtrack. The film was scanned and graded in 2K resolution on a Spirit Datacine from a 35mm Interpositive. The audio was transferred from the original printmaster mags. The colourist was Jeff Chaves and all restoration work was done at Point 360 Digital Film Labs, Los Angeles. This project was supervised by Mike Lechner of Lakeshore Entertainment.

## PRODUCTION CREDITS

Disc and Booklet Produced by **Ewan Cant**

Executive Producer: **Francesco Simeoni**

Production Assistant: **Liane Cunje**

Technical Producer: **James White**

QC Manager: **Nora Mehenni**

Subtitling: **dayformight\***

Authoring: **Digital Cinema United**

Artist: **Matthew Griffin**

Design: **Jack Pemberton**

## SPECIAL THANKS

Alex Agran, John De Bello, Michael Felsher and Anthony Starke.





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