

Spaghetti confection

A marvelous group of serious but playful Italian westerns have been gathered by Arrow Video in a terrific Blu-ray set, [The Complete Sartana](#) (UPC#760137134084, \$100). Each film is a little bit different, but all five have plenty of commonalities. Because of the differences, they can be watched as a group, but they are so confection-like that it is probably better to break them up and savor each one separately. The series has been compared to James Bond or, as one commentator points out, MacGyver, since the films have lots of gimmicks and the resourceful hero can get out of any predicament as if he had planned to all along. In each movie he is sort of like a detective, looking for murderers and stolen money as he searches for clues and always remains at least a step, if not several steps, ahead of the villains. The hero also has ghost-like qualities, and gets from one place to another at times as if he were Harry Potter with a wand. The films do not have enormous budgets, but they are tightly designed and the narratives are always logical, at least within the rules the movies establish. Dramatically, they are mostly superficial, and there is not a strong social conscience to them, although the villains are inevitably wealthy, but the important thing is that the movies are tremendous fun, bouncing about from one fanciful situation to the next, with the hero always in control and always the coolest guy on the screen.

Dressed a bit like an undertaker, Gianni Garko stars in the initial feature from 1968, *If You Meet Sartana...Pray for Your Death*. Bandits massacre the travelers on a stagecoach and haul away a strongbox, and then someone else massacres the bandits and grabs the strongbox for himself, while the hero watches the entire operation go down. When he returns to town, the hero starts needling the surviving thieves and stirs up the hornet's nest until he's the only one standing. Running 96 minutes, the narrative has enough twists to keep the viewer guessing, and there are gunfights and other action at regular intervals. More importantly, the film sustains a pleasing atmosphere, combining the period décor, the suspense and the greasy characters to present as a wonderful array of counterpoints to the ever so slick hero. Directed by Gianfranco Parolini under the name of Frank Kramer, Klaus Kinski appears as a sharp shooting assassin, and William Berger and Sydney Chaplin co-star.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1. The color transfer looks terrific, with bright hues and accurate flesh tones. There is a lot of wear to the source material, however, with lines, scratches and other debris appearing periodically to pull your attention away from the action. The monophonic sound is okay, and there is a pleasing musical score by Piero Piccioni.

Most of the films were shot so that English would match the lip movements, and each one is presented with an Italian track and an English track, with optional English subtitles. The English dubbing is usually pretty good. On *Pray for Your Death*, the Italian track has passages that revert momentarily to English. Along with a nice collection of promotional materials, there is a good 17-minute medley of Piccioni's music accompanying a montage of images and thumbnail texts providing the backgrounds of the various cast members. Also featured is an enjoyable 22-minute interview with Parolini, talking about his childhood (he used to play with makeshift boats in the Trevi Fountain), his career, and how the producer of *Pray for Your Death* shortchanged him. He even makes good natured fun of his wife, who is suffering from Alzheimer's. "Now I have to see her in this condition. I always caress her. Sometimes she grabs a knife because she wants to kill me, then the next day she tries to caress me."

Eurowestern enthusiast Mike Siegel supplies a jovial commentary track, talking about how much he enjoys the films and why, but also providing some background on the series and the stars. As he points out, most of the films were shot in Italy rather than Spain, and the outdoor sequences have their limitations. "You never have any long shots, you know, because there's nothing to see. You probably have Rome five miles away from here, so maybe that's another reason why [the director] concentrates on the action, because if you don't have the landscapes you're gonna have to kill people or something."

You know how at the end of all the **Dollars** movies, Clint Eastwood's character rides off with all sorts of cash, but at the beginning of the next one, all he has again is his horse? Well, at the beginning of the 1969 *I Am Sartana, Your Angel of Death*, Garko's character is lounging in a mansion, being looked after by a butler. Unfortunately, somebody else pretending to be him has just robbed a bank, and so he decides to get back in the saddle again, to find out who the culprit is, and to add to his cash reserves if he can. There are the usual mix of Mexican bandits, greasy businessmen and nondescript gunfighters, and again, the hero is always one step ahead of all of them (at one point, if you don't blink, you can see the tops of busses passing at the end of the Old West street). Kinski also wanders through the film, like a distinctive and pleasing spice that is present but does not overpower a meal. Frank Wolf co-stars. There are some enjoyable casino sequence and an extended gunfight that takes place in the dark, as the hero dispatches well over a dozen bad guys. The gunfights are creative and Garko's character remains an ideal mix of wit and eye candy charm. Directed by Giuliano Carnimeo as Anthony Ascott, as were the next three films, if the 103-minute program has any drawbacks, we would say that the beats at the end are imperfect, as if the film had too much story to wrap up with its various incremental finales. Nevertheless, it is a fun movie and reinforces the pleasure that the set has to offer as a whole.

Unlike the first film, the wear on the source material is minimal.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1, as are all of the remaining films. The image looks very slightly aged at times, but hues are bright and flesh tones are fresh. The monophonic sound is tinny, but workable. On the whole, the Vasili Kojucharov and Elsie Mancuso musical score is appealing, but the theme they have devised for Kinski's character brushes perilously close to *Santa Claus Is Coming to Town* ("You'd better watch out..."), and tends to pull you out of the film. There is another brief but satisfying collection of promotional materials, a very enjoyable 24-minute reminiscence by actor/stuntman Sal Borgese, who talks about his career and all of the crazy things he's had to do over the years, and a good 19-minute interview with screenwriter Ernesto Gastaldi, covering his complete career but also going into detail over the Sartana films that he worked on.

Western historians C. Courtney Joyner and Henry Peake supply a good commentary track, again going over the series as a whole and placing it in the context of the Spaghetti Westerns subgenre. Their talk is wide ranging, discussing not just the biographies of the cast and the filmmakers, but the nature of Italian filmmaking itself, and how it is much less hierarchical than American filmmaking, where each level of actors, for example, eats separately from the others. They also analyze the series as a whole, drawing comparisons to the Bond films and today's comic book movies (although nobody mentions Jonah Hex, who appeared in comics shortly after the series finished and had kind of a similar get up).

"When you see this kind of action done this way, it has the impact, but without, if you will, the guilt, because there's no brutality to it, which might be actually a bad thing, because it gives an unrealistic view of violence, but it gives a lighter tone to the approach to the story, but without being really tongue in cheek. It's a real balance act, and I think they always carry it off."

"There is a very nice comic book feel to this, in a good way."

"It's not somber, which had very much become a hallmark of westerns. Grim and relentless. We love grim and relentless, but it is fun to see something that is different."

Although they are highly knowledgeable about the series, the stars and the filmmakers, by the way, they do misidentify Kinski's theme as *Here Comes Santa Claus*.

The first two films have an inherent satirical tone and humor, drawn from the hero's consistent infallibility. The third film, *Sartana's Here...Trade Your Pistol for a Coffin* from 1970, in which George Hilton steps in for Garko as the title character, is even more comedic, although, unlike so many Italian westerns, the comedy never devolves into tiresome clowning, even when a dandy-like gunfighter is introduced, parading around in a white suit and holding an umbrella for the sun. But the film is more deliberately funny in how it presents the characters and how they react to the hero. It opens with bandits stopping a coach and killing the guards on board, but rather than stealing anything, they just set the rig on fire. The hero watches them from a distance and then investigates, discovering that the coach was transporting bags of sand meant to look like gold. Again, he returns to town and steps into the standard mix of bandits, financiers and other gunfighters, as he attempts to determine the true location of the gold, engaging in a number of creatively staged gunfights and other shenanigans. It is a shame that Garko isn't there, just for the sake of consistency, but Hilton makes an adept substitute and, running 92 minutes, the film is another enjoyable entry in the series.

The picture looks great, with minimal aging and bright hues. The sound is reasonably strong, and there is a lusty musical score by Bruno Nicolai. Along with a collection of memorabilia in still frame, there is a great 20-minute interview with the Uruguayan Hilton talking about his work in westerns ("When I moved to Italy, someone noticed me, put a cowboy hat on me, a cigar in my mouth, and that's how I started to do westerns.") and the Sartana movies, a sweet 29-minute interview with co-star Erika Blanc about the genre films and her profession (she also points out that even though the films were made cheaply, the craftsmanship in things like the costumes was excellent), and a 15-minute interview with co-star and agent Tony Askin, who talks about filling the supporting roles with character actors (he recalls taking telephoto stills of an actress, so that the producer wouldn't realize how fat she was—and then when the producer complained after hiring her, he suggested that she put on pounds during the shoot).

Garko returns in the 1970 *Have a Good Funeral My Friend...Sartana Will Pay*, but he forgoes the manly five-day beard look for a wussy blond mustache that takes some getting used to. A group of miners are slaughtered in a cabin and the hero seeks to avenge their death and find their gold. There are no Mexican bandits, but there is a Chinese gambling house with an inscrutable boss, and plenty of other suspicious rich guys trying to get their hands on the gold. Both the narrative and the action are a bit tighter and more developed than in the previous movies, suggesting that the budget had gone up a little bit, as well. And for the first time in any of the films, one of the bad guys lands a punch the hero is not expecting, but it doesn't take him long to recover. Running 93 minutes, the film is a very satisfying installment in the series, which seemed to get better and better as it went along.

The picture is in very good shape and the sound is solid. There is another great Nicolai musical score. Along with another collection of promotional materials in still frame, there is a 23-minute interview with acrobatic stuntman Roberto Dell'Acqua, who talks not only about his own work, but about his brothers, who are also stuntmen. They all got their start in the circus. He discusses his whole career—he has some great stories about shooting Robert Altman's **Popeye**—but only touches on the Sartana films briefly.

Joyner and Peake provide another commentary track—it's their favorite of the films—following up on the themes and information they shared in the previous talk, and also analyzing the story and the filmmaking technique on display. "When we think about the Sartana series, just overall, is that there is thought behind them. Folks are always, 'Well my gosh, the stories are kind of wild and they're undisciplined,' and actually, they're not. They're just these wonderful puzzle pieces that fit together in their own way, not the way I think you normally expect them to. But these movies absolutely live by their own rules, and they stick to it."

Although Garko still has the dopey mustache, the last film, *Light the Fuse...Sartana Is Coming*, from 1970, is the best movie in the series, and it also looks the best. The budget seems incrementally higher, and the picture is smooth and slick throughout, with strong hues and rich fleshtones. The sound is crisp and full, as well, with another terrific Nicolai score. The hero deliberately allows himself to be beaten and thrown into prison at the beginning, so he can contact a former partner and find out where a stash of gold has been hidden. Afterwards, he has to piece together clues to figure out its exact location, as the witnesses he interviews each give conflicting stories of how a murder was committed. The narrative is continually intriguing and builds to an imaginative and visually satisfying conclusion. Meanwhile, there is an elaborate portable pipe organ that doubles as artillery, and many other violent delights.

Also featured is a 22-minute interview with another great stuntman, Sal Bergese, who talks about his entire career and shares stories about the different productions he has worked on, directors he worked with, the extensive friendship he developed with Yul Brynner, and about making the various films in the series. There is another and different 20-minute interview with Gastaldi, who talks a lot more about his career as a whole, and a terrific 24-minute collection of older interviews with Garko and Carnimeo, talking about themselves and the Sartana films.

Forgotten movies

A documentary with clips from a number of spectacular films you've never seen before, *Hitler's Hollywood*, has been released by Kino Lorber (UPC#738329232467, \$30). The film compiles selections from films that were made in Germany's robust movie industry between 1933 and 1945, looking at the artists, the themes that underlie the propaganda (heroes were always dying in martyrdom), and the efforts to imitate what was popular in Hollywood (a musical remake of *It Happened One Night*). There are surprises, such as a look at a pretty good movie about female empowerment (until its conformist conclusion) starring Ingrid Bergman, and rare glimpses of films by G.W. Pabst and Douglas Sirk. What is most compelling, though, is the understanding that there is an entire trove of fascinating movies that are, for understandable reasons of course, generally unavailable for viewing. Intended for entertainment and escapism, they are not overburdened with 'the party line,' as it were, although they all had to adhere to many kinds of restrictions. Even the anti-Semitism, at least in the clips that are shared, is not rampant. The villains usually come from Allied countries, just as villains in the films from the Allied countries in those days usually came from Axis countries, but there is a wide range of entertainments, featuring talented artists who essentially lost their stardom in front of and behind the camera for having supported the wrong side, and are now long forgotten. The 2017 film deftly analyzes the undercurrents and acknowledges the limitations and occasional disingenuous nature of the films, but at the same time, it celebrates the talent for the sake of the talent, just as everyone does today with Richard Wagner.

The clips are all in German, supported by optional English subtitles. There is a German narration, supported by additional English subtitles, and there is an English narration spoken by Udo Kier. Both versions come in both 5.1-channel Dolby Digital, which enhances the musical score, and in standard stereo. The big problem with the English track is that Kier has a rather weak, soft voice, made all the more tentative because he is not speaking his native language, and on the 5.1 track you can barely hear him. Fortunately, you can activate the second set of subtitles, or switch over to the standard stereo, since having the music in an aggressive surround really doesn't serve much purpose.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.78:1 and an accommodation for enhanced 16:9 playback. The clips have been restored as carefully as possible, and the color sequences are, in particular, quite spectacular. A trailer has also been included.

The films may be forgotten, but they are not completely obscure, and Kino did, previously, release a couple of them on DVD. One of the most compelling is the fairly amazing 1943 *Titanic* (UPC#738329225629, \$20), which tells a reasonably straightforward and relatively accurate story of its sinking—it gets the physical details right, at least, and quite impressively. The hero is a German officer who was called in at the last minute to replace an ill member of the crew, refusing to follow orders that place the passengers in danger, and the villains are the very greedy businessmen, such as John Jacob Astor and White Star Line president J. Bruce Ismay, who are trying to manipulate White Star's stock during the boat's voyage, as it attempts to set a record for the crossing. There are romances, which are less developed than those in the American movies about the sinking, but more elaborate than how the story was approached in *A Night to Remember* (which is said to have lifted some of the special effects footage from the German film). Indeed, one could argue that the attitude the German film takes, that the boat sank entirely because of the moral failings of capitalism, is the most correct, although its

exaggerations undercut its arguments. More importantly, however, the 88-minute feature is superbly staged, so that its suspense and spectacle have retained a timeless appeal, while its attitude has a kind of oddball tone that is intriguing in its own right.

The full screen black-and-white picture has its share of damage and wear, although it is generally presentable. The image is often grainy, and there are times when frame freezes and other manipulations are clearly covering up greater wear. The monophonic sound is adequate for the film's condition, and the movie is in German with optional English subtitles. Along with a trailer, there is a still frame collection of promotional materials, a terrific 10-minute silent newsreel from 1912 about the boat's sinking (you can't take your eyes off the vitality of the youngsters who were working on board one of the rescue ships, and how fascinated they are at being filmed), and a terrific 16-minute piece, from the same era, promoting the Titanic's sister ship, *The Olympic*.

Kino also released Sirk's movie, *La Habanera* (UPC#73832903-1527, \$30), which was made in 1937 and takes place in Puerto Rico (it was shot in the Canary Islands). The film is uneven, but its best moments are pure Sirk, as a visiting Swedish tourist falls for a local landowner when she sees him take over for an injured toreador and kill a bull in the ring. She stays behind and marries him, but a decade later the marriage has gone sour and a fever threatens the island. The landowner tries to suppress news about the fever, and a visiting Swedish bacteriologist defies the authorities while searching for a cure. The film has quite a few song numbers, showcasing the star, Zarah Leander, and its anti-authoritarian tone is pretty much universal, so that a viewer would be hard pressed to point out any moment where Sirk is pandering his Nazi backers. Some sequences in the melodrama are rather stodgy, particularly the scenes (and songs) that Leander has with her character's child, but other segments are deftly composed blends of passion and metaphor that enhance a viewer's appreciation not just of the film, but of cinema as a whole.

The full screen black-and-white picture has more instances where frames are frozen to disguise damage on the source material, and other impurities, but there are also sections that are in fairly nice condition, with smooth textures and crisp contrasts. The monophonic sound is fine, and the film is in German with optional English subtitles. There are a few nice promotional photos in still frame, excerpts in text from two original German reviews of the film and a Sirk filmography.

Hot rod thriller

A 70-minute crime thriller that turns out to be so entertaining it is disheartening when the film all too suddenly and laughably wraps things up instead of allowing a final act to play out for another few minutes, *A Strange Adventure*, has been released on Blu-ray by Paramount and Kino Lorber Incorporated as a *KL Studio Classics* title (UPC#738329226763, \$25). Ben Cooper stars in the 1956 Republic Pictures feature as a young hot rod enthusiast whose car attracts the attentions of some crooks planning an armored car heist. They all end up in a cabin during a blizzard. Jan Merlin, Joan Evans and Marla English co-star, and Nick Adams also has a prominent role as one of the crooks, using a handkerchief and a supposed nasal problem to put some frills on his performance. If it were a major feature, he'd be an embarrassment, but here, it works fine. Directed by William Witney, there is also a nice romantic triangle that develops between Cooper's character, the bad woman working with the crooks, and the good girl who lives in the cabin with her brother, working as a monitor for a weather service. The film is terrific up until the end, but rather than playing out the last act, the filmmakers cram the story into a quick radio report as the heroes ride off to live happily ever after. Regardless, the trip to get there is very enjoyable.

The black-and-white picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.66:1. The image is generally spotless and crisp, and the monophonic sound is okay. There is no captioning. Republic enthusiast Toby Roan provides a functional commentary track, not talking too much about the story (he ignores the cheat at the end) but sharing a lot about every actor who pops up on the screen, providing backgrounds for the people behind the camera and identifying every location. There is also a brief inserted set of comments by Witney's son, Jay Dee, who talks about his father's career, shares a few anecdotes and acknowledges what he can about the movie at hand.

Pre-code romance

A fairly good pre-Code romance, *My Past*, has been released by Warner Home Video as an *Archive Collection* title (UPC#888574678227, \$22). Bebe Daniels plays a Broadway star who has attracted the attention of a wealthy industrialist, played by Lewis Stone, but also becomes involved with the industrialist's younger partner/assistant, played by Ben Lyon. Joan Blondell is also featured. It is the pre-Code shenanigans (including an eye-popping nude bathing scene) that make the 1931 film appealing, since the characters can act like genuine adults without getting punished by the filmmakers for their sins. Running 72 minutes, the film is the usual exploration of the gilded life (with Blondell looking on), but the characters are appealing and the story has a decent number of ups and downs to keep its inevitable outcome up for grabs as long as it possibly can.

The full screen black-and-white picture has some wear, with sections that have scratches and other markings, although overall it is in passable condition, and the monophonic sound is okay. There is no captioning.