

They Came From The Basement!

By John Seal

RITUAL OF DEATH (1990) ♂♂♂

D: Fauzi Mansur. Michael Kelly, Olair Coan, Karina Palatnik, Sergio Hingst, Serafim Gonzalez, Tiao Hoover. 84 mins. (Complete Entertainment VHS, n.i.d.)

Each of our lives is filled with special moments and memories: weddings and divorces, births and deaths, first jobs and first pink slips. This, though, is *VideoScope*, where special moments are measured a little differently: who amongst us can forget their first glimpse of *The Creeping Terror*'s carpet monster, *The Giant Claw*'s flying turkey, and pretty much everything in *Hausu*? How can something as mundane as Little Johnny graduating from elementary school possibly compare to those *truly* momentous occasions?

If you're eager for another unforgettable experience (and one that won't require you to pay alimony), allow me to introduce you to *Ritual of Death*. Directed by Fauzi Mansur (though you've never heard of him, he's made over 40 films), this Brazilian feature's sheer cinematic strangeness and overall ineptitude—the type of ineptitude you can't possibly learn at film school—may cause your jaw to fall agape and (if you're not careful) remain permanently malformed.

The story begins in a musty lecture hall, where a tweedy academic (Gonzalez) is delivering a presentation about the transmigration of souls in ancient Egypt. It's a bizarre and bloody occult practice that somehow made its way to the Americas (perhaps the Phoenicians were responsible?), where it was duly adopted by indigenous tribes. Listening intently are members of a local theater company and a mysterious man in a bowler hat, whose ominous presence stirs apprehension as the professor explains that the ritual involved human sacrifices chosen from a pool of "young virgins and relatively useless members of the tribe."

Abruptly concluding his presentation ("A whole tribe would be eliminated. Thank you all very much"), the prof has made a deep impression on the young drama enthusiasts, including company director Jim (Kelly, also responsible for *Ritual of Death*'s atonal electronic score) and actors Brad (Coan) and Carol (Palatnik). Determined to turn the ritual into a stage play (as Jim describes it, "something that the public can relate to but still get on their nerves"), the group needs only one thing: the ancient parchment detailing the practice (whether it's printed in Por-

tuguese or one of the company can read ancient Egyptian is never addressed).

Meanwhile, Bowler Hat Man (Hingst) is also in the parchment market, but for a different reason: he's the leader of a cult hoping to use the ritual for some ill-defined but likely nefarious purpose. In order to bring his evil plan of transmigration domination to fruition, he also needs the ancient scroll but is happy to let the eager young thespians do the dirty work. Brad, Carol (wearing hideous '80s parachute pants) and adventurous pal Nicky (Hoover) promptly break into the library and snatch it while the professor is napping.

Now the artistic process begins. Brad sensibly wants to rewrite the manuscript to make it more dramatic; Jim, however, insists it be performed exactly as written. Being the director, Jim gets his way and, as rehearsals commence, strange things begin happening: high winds come up at inopportune moments, frogs hang out at Brad's place, and Brad starts taking his character *way* too seriously, chowing down on a plate of raw meat from his dipsomaniac mother's refrigerator (Mom: "You're not using *druuuugs* are you? Don't forget, I'm the one supposed to be addicted around here!").

Sure enough, the ritual works, and the soul of an Egyptian priest promptly assumes control of Brad's body. Now subsumed by this alter ego, Brad takes his method acting a little too seriously, and the body count mounts as the professor and the police (personified by the film's only Black character) search for the purloined parchment. Will it be recovered before the play opens?

Absurd plot aside, *Ritual of Death* really crosses from the ridiculous to the sublime thanks to its atrocious acting (everyone enunciates their dialogue very, very, precisely) and low-budget gore effects. Giving Herschel Gordon Lewis a run for his money, Mansur slathers on the grue, with hands, faces, and other body parts leaking, melting, and detaching with alarming regularity. A wind machine kills one character by running over him (his intestines squirt out like sauce from a plastic bag) and kills another with its blades (represented by the character wiggling lower while someone off camera throws around slabs of meaty-looking red stuff). And of course, there's a bloody goat's head for those times when you're taking a bath and feel the need to be drizzled by *bovidae* hemoglobin.

Released full-frame on VHS by the delightfully named Complete Entertainment, *Ritual of Death* can be considered a companion piece of sorts for Mansur's other horror effort, *Satanic Attraction*—the trailer for which prefaces Complete's video presentation. It's abundantly clear this film is every inch *Ritual*'s equal, suggesting a marketing opportunity for a Fauzi Mansur double-bill on DVD or Blu-ray. Code Red seems like the perfect outfit to transmigrate *Ritual of Death* to a digital format. ♂

MONDO GIALLO

THE FIFTH CORD (1971) ♂♂♂

D: Luigi Bazzoni. Franco Nero, Silvia Monti, Pamela Tiffin, Rossella Falk, Edmund Purdom, Ira von Furstenberg. 93 mins. (Arrow Video, \$39.95 Blu-ray)

Alcoholic newspaper reporter Andrea Bild (Nero) is assigned to collect the facts regarding a New Year's Eve mugging that left a wealthy young socialite hospitalized. After the attack, a number of the victim's friends begin to die at the hands of an unseen killer. Bild becomes obsessed with identifying the murderer and enlists ex-lover Helen (Monti) to help him figure it out. Constantly inebriated, Bild suspects everyone and tries to get one step ahead of the killer, but more often than not shows up only to find the body of a fresh victim. (With the discovery of each new corpse, the police increasingly suspect Bild of the slayings.) His determination ultimately prevailing, Bild finally confronts the slash-happy killer. *The Fifth Cord* starts off strong, with Nero portraying a classic flawed hero, and grows more suspenseful with each successive murder. The attack scenes are shocking and wonderfully punctuated by Ennio Morricone's score. Bazzoni's flick adds weirdo socialites (some who supply live-sex shows for their friends at parties) and a generous helping of kinky sleaze. Monti is absolutely terrific as Nero's ex-lover, who initially resists his drunken charms but soon comes to depend on him for her life. Extras on Arrow's 2k restoration Blu-ray include new interviews with star Nero, editor Eugenio Albiso, author Michael Mackenzie, audio commentary by critic Travis Crawford, a previously deleted sequence, video essay and more. Even the most astute giallo fans are unlikely to determine who the killer is, and even if they just guess, there's no way they will anticipate his demented motivation. ♂

—Rob Freese

