

Children in peril

We jumped out of our seat so many times watching the two-platter Warner Home Video *Blu-ray + DVD + Digital Code* release of **The Curse of La Llorona** (UPC#883929667918, \$36) that you would have thought our upholstery was comprised of springs. A good old-fashioned ghost story with a narrative structure rather similar to **The Exorcist** (the story is set the year **Exorcist** came out), and utilizing a deliberately vague but opportunistic subtext about Latin immigration (blink and you'll miss them, there are also a couple of links to Warner's **Annabelle** movies), the 2019 film concerns a widowed mother whose two children are threatened by a spirit that wants them dead. The corpse-like figure appears in shock cut after shock cut, and it gets you every time. This is especially true on the Blu-ray, where the Dolby Atmos sound pounds away at your nerves from every angle and snaps at you whenever you think there's a lull. The audio is crisp and unrelenting. Running 93 minutes, the film is not like a fireworks display, in that the finale isn't particularly grander than what has come before it, but that hardly matters, since from the beginning of the movie to the end, what happens keeps your heart leaping out of your mouth.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1. The transfer on the DVD looks fine, but it is the BD delivery that is the most satisfying, as barely perceptible shapes in the dark are just distinctive enough to turn your nerves into Jell-O. The DVD's 5.1-channel Dolby Digital track doesn't quite have the same sheer punch as the BD, either, but maybe that is the version fans with cardiac conditions should consider viewing. Both platters have an audio track that describes the action ("Chris tries to shut an open window but a gust of wind blows him back. Sprawled on the floor, he watches the pink curtains blowing in the wind. One of them billows upward, revealing La Llorona behind it."), alternate French and Spanish audio tracks, optional English, French and Spanish subtitles, and a passable 6-minute production featurette about how effectively the make up was designed and utilized. The BD has additional Portuguese language options, a good 18 minute montage of storyboards with some side-by-side comparisons that show how meticulously the scares were manufactured, 11 minutes of sensibly deleted scenes including a pointless final story beat, and 12 minutes of promotional featurettes that focus on the story (and its basis in Latin American folktales), the cast and the unbridled enthusiasm of director Michael Chaves.

Triple Seventies horror bill

They aren't lame, but they are not exactly the cream of the crop, either. Arrow Academy has released three horror films from the Seventies in a three-platter Blu-ray set, **American Horror Project Volume Two** (UPC# 760137252986, \$100). While those who are not hardcore horror fanatics would probably pass over the films if they were released individually, the chance to savor all three might very well be a bit more of a draw. All of the films have adequately delivered monophonic audio tracks (although the ranges on each are somewhat limited) and optional English subtitles. The basic picture transfer of each feature is also quite impressive. Although they were shot on low budgets and are filled with cinematographic compromises or just plain bad camerawork, it is clear that the transfers are meticulous. The colors are as fresh as possible, the fleshtones are as accurate as possible and the images are as sharp as possible.

Directed by John Hayes, the first film, *Dream No Evil*, is about a woman who imagines that her father is killing her lovers, when, after a bit of a tease, the 1970 film makes it perfectly clear that she is the one committing the crimes, although it does continue to cut back and forth between reality and her fantasies. There is a speech by a doctor at the end that deliberately rivals and echoes the doctor's soliloquy at the end of **Psycho**, but that is part of the movie's charms (it even seems to make fun of that sequence's deadening pace). Brooke Mills stars with Paul Prokop and Michael Pataki, and the elderly but game Edmund O'Brien plays the imaginary father. Hollywood character actor Marc Lawrence is also featured. Set in the Southwest, the 84-minute feature never really builds to a big suspenseful climax, but it is moody enough to hold a viewer's attention and there is a bit of harrowing action here and there. In being so open with the heroine's imagination, the film sort of invites the viewer's imagination to join in, and that generally accommodates any continuity problems or other oddball narrative shifts that come along. In that sense, the movie is foolproof, so that the performers, from O'Brien to the lesser known members of the cast, can ply their trade and keep a viewer engaged, regardless of what turns the story takes. Throw in a little sex and violence, and what's not to like?

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1. There is a serviceable musical score by Jaime Mendoza-Nava. Along with a passable 9-minute appreciation of the film's idiosyncrasies, there is a very good 34-minute look at Hayes' early films, and the different areas of exploitation into which he ventured. "Thanks to the dedication of horror fans, these movies are his best known work. Horror films have always enjoyed a special place in the hearts of cult movie devotees, attracting a far more obsessive fascination compared to hillbilly dramas, war pictures or low budget noir melodramas." A nice 22-minute profile of O'Brien is also offered. It makes no mention of **1984**, however, which is kind of a shame because that film would fit right into the treatise the piece presents about the kinds of noir-oriented scripts and films O'Brien was choosing to make in the Forties and Fifties.

We reviewed a pair of films Hayes made with Rue McClanahan,

Hollywood after Dark / The Rotten Apple, in Sep 06. Not only did she work with him, but she lived with him, off and on, during the early Sixties. McClanahan provides a 30-minute audio-only interview, discussing Hayes' background and early career, describing her own career (and love life, in detail) and how she started working with him, sharing many anecdotes about their time together. It is a great talk.

There is also a commentary track featuring feminist film scholars Kat Ellinger and Samm Deighan, who discuss Hayes' work from the perspective of female empowerment, and also tie it into many other exploitation films from the same era. They make viable arguments for the case that Hayes was a true auteur (not to mention that his films were so cheap, he was pretty much doing every major and minor task required to put them together). "We've said a bunch now. His family relationships and romantic relationships in film are often complicated and just short of terrible. But he always, I feel, followed his own particular vision, regardless of what genre he was in. I love that." "I think that's the one thing that becomes such a magnet in his films is when you watch enough of them, you start to get drawn in, you start to recognize the in-jokes and recurring things that come up time and time again. It becomes really, really rewarding because you feel like you're in on the secret with him. I think he was a tremendously interesting filmmaker because of these personal touches you tend see crop up in his films." "I think one of my favorite things about this film, [and] his films overall, is sort of the way that he's able to kind of depict these troubled female characters with genuine pathos. You could look at a film like this and sort of laugh at its cheaper or more inept qualities, but I think it would be hard for anyone to deny there's genuine emotion behind a lot of these scenes, and you really feel for her. Just this sense of kind of doom is overwhelming."

While *Dream No Evil* is somewhat playful, the 1976 *Dark August* is a more serious drama about a man who may or may not be having threatening hallucinations. Although, once again, the climax is a bit limp, the film, which runs 87 minutes, does have a few appealing aspects. The star, J.J. Barry, has an Eric Bogosian vibe going on, and delivers a strong performance, playing an artist who is suffering from major traumas after accidentally killing a little girl in a traffic accident. Even though he was exonerated from blame (she ran out of the brush in front of his truck), he feels like the entire town is looking at him every time he goes in for supplies, and he is especially wary of the girl's unforgiving grandfather. Shot in Stowe Vermont, the location footage is quite charming, and there are a number of decently creepy moments. When Barry's character is in the middle of making love to his girlfriend and suddenly flips out, it is rather unnerving. But when the film turns to an extended witch's magic ceremony to rid the hero of his inner and outer demons, even though the sequence features guest star Kim Hunter, it is clear that the movie isn't going to amount to much more than what it has already accomplished. The film is great for what it is, particularly as an example of low budget regional filmmaking, and it is ideal for inclusion in the collection, but its entertainment potential has plenty of limitations and it is the weakest of the three movies.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1. The image framing is often quite striking, although there are times when too much of the picture is in shadows. The musical score, by William S. Fischer, is appealing and effective. There is a great 15-minute interview with the director, Martin Goldman, who describes his successful career making commercials, how he tried to transition that to films, and what his specific strategies were for making the film ("To tell you the truth, I didn't have an ending. It's finally come out. If people think that there's something special about the movie, why should it be for me to tell them not?"). Also featured is a nice 9-minute interview with producer Marianne Kanter, who explains how she got started as a producer, how she roped Hunter into the film, and what her rules are for making features; a wonderful 34-minute summary of films made in or made about Vermont (including quite a bit of background on *Dark August*) and the pervasive interest in the occult that lurks in the state; and a succinct 11-minute appreciation of the film's strengths and its history. Goldman also supplies a commentary track, prompted by a pair of video producers. They slow down in the movie's second half and the conversation is a bit sleepy even when there aren't gaps, but they provide an overall view of what shooting the film was like (about making a dog look mean: "What they do is they put a little rubber thing underneath their lip, between their gum and their lip, and when you put one on either side, the dog looks like it's snarling. From a nice little puppy, you get this crazy, mad wolf.") and where Goldman got his ideas for various aspects of the film.

The most traditional of the three films, *The Child*, from 1977, is also the best of the group. Opening on a dark and stormy night, the heroine, played by Laurel Barnett, has been hired to take care of a young girl whose mother recently passed away. The girl lives with her father and older brother in a large house in the woods, and there are creepy things going on in the night, which, it turns out, the little girl has a lot to do with. The brother is a good guy and the film, which runs 83 minutes, ought to have played up his relationship with the heroine a little more than it does, but the movie builds to a rousing climax (it is also kind of a zombie movie) and has consistent scares (there's even a jump scare involving a jack-in-the-box, but what can you do?), with a pervasive atmosphere of foreboding throughout and a decent amount of gore, which is all one really requires to have a good time.

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