

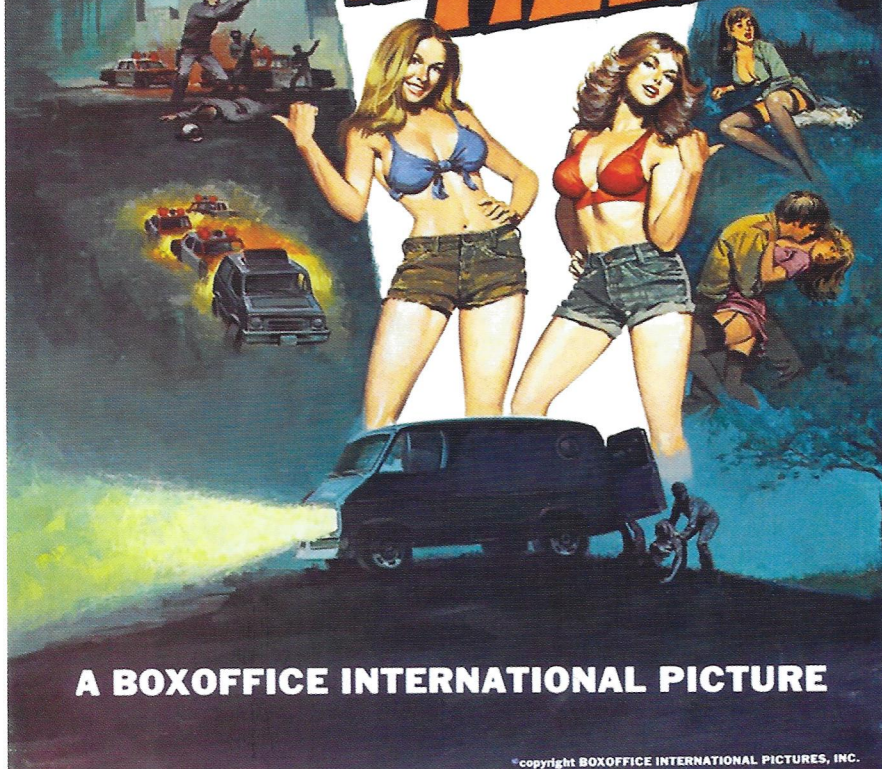
**"THERE IS NO SUCH
THING AS A FREE
RIDE!!"**

Pressed and steamed indie shock
from the 1970s.

HARRY NOVAK
presents

By **CHRIS ALEXANDER**

Hitch Hike to HELL



Director Irvin Berwick (MALIBU HIGH) may not have made many movies in his day, but as we all know, quality trumps quantity, and his 1977 exploitation psychodrama shocker HITCH HIKE TO HELL is not only his best work, it's one of the weirdest and most potent pictures of its kind. And that's saying something, considering the company the movie kept during that most sensational era of passion-pit drive-in potboilers. And really, "quality" is a subjective term. By conventional standards, the shoestring-budgeted HITCH HIKE TO HELL isn't a particularly well-produced work. But man, does it pack a disorienting, primal punch.

The film tells the tawdry tale of Howard (Robert Gribbin), a dry-cleaning delivery driver who is seemingly happy, upbeat and well-liked by all. Certainly, the wayward women hitchhikers he picks up dig his company; he's kind and a good listener.

But the problem is, when said runaway ladies start taking trash about their domestic lives—specifically, griping about their mothers—Howard starts to

get dark. Then, he gets darker. Within minutes, Jekyll becomes Hyde and Howard drives his poor passengers to a remote locale, yanks them screaming out of his van and beats and savagely rapes them before brutally murdering them. And then it repeats.

The wearisome, oppressive central mechanics of violent male aggression and feminine victimhood are well-worn in the annals of exploitation, and Berwick does not shy away from the horror of Howard's attacks. But what elevates the film and makes it so interesting is the director's dedication to sticking with his lead character. Berwick follows Howard as he goes about his day, his crimes affecting his fragile employment situation at the dry cleaners (truly, this is the only picture of this kind I can think of featuring an antagonist who trades in pressed trousers and steamed blouses) and, most importantly, his unhealthy relationship with his mother.

Again, the latter device is exhaustingly familiar and predates PSYCHO, the movie that most mad-male-murderer pictures tend to crib from. But in HITCH HIKE TO HELL, Howard's festering obsession with protecting his mother—and the very notion of motherhood—stems from his sister, who we're told has broken their mom's heart and abandoned the family. We don't get much deeper into the issues that caused Howard's sibling to depart, but whatever it was, the effect of her absence has exacerbated whatever serious mental illness Howard already has. In fact, Berwick smartly leaves it vague enough to suggest that Howard himself may have played some part in his sister's problems. Whatever they might have been...

But HITCH HIKE TO HELL doesn't solely stick with Howard's transgres-



sions. The sociopath's reign of violence and violation is tempered by a police investigation into the crimes, and—unlike what we see in many running-time-padding subplots woven into exploitation cinema—the cops aren't idiots, reacting with sensitivity and outrage to the crimes and refusing to relent in tracking their quarry. It helps that the lead detective is played by the great Russell Johnson (ATTACK OF THE CRAB MONSTERS, IT CAME FROM OUTER SPACE, key episodes of THE TWILIGHT ZONE and, of course, GILLIGAN'S ISLAND), here much older and wearier, which adds emotional weight to the character as he faces the grisly aftermaths of Howard's killing spree. And in regards to said spree, Berwick is unsparing, introducing younger girl (and in one instance, young male) victims to Howard's dry-cleaning van of death, offering a vague hope that maybe the more innocent passengers might be spared. But no: As soon as any disparaging words on motherhood are uttered, it's game over. They all die. Their bodies dumped in the crudest and most careless of places...

HITCH HIKE TO HELL was distributed by the grindhouse huckster distributor Harry Novak, who no doubt felt its filthy charms fit right in with other releases from his Boxoffice International

Pictures, like TOYS ARE NOT FOR CHILDREN and AXE—movies that similarly offered kinky come-ons and cheap, lurid thrills with injections of surprising cinematic sophistication. But, as with most of his pictures, Novak's ad campaign for HITCH HIKE TO HELL was ludi-

crously misleading, making the movie seem like a fun Crown International hotchicks-and-cars caper, the diametric opposite of what it actually is. Arrow Video's recent Blu-ray release offers that colorful and striking poster art on the reverse of its sleeve, which is welcome, as the erroneous advertising of movies of this ilk are essential components of their legacies.

But it's a shame HITCH HIKE TO HELL wasn't handled better back in 1977, as it's a tight, intelligent and ruthless little thriller, with style to spare, a dynamite lead turn by Gribbin and a haunting country-tinged theme song warbled by Nancy Adams. It's yet another piece of '70s indie American shock that needs to be rediscovered and appreciated for the artful work of finely tuned trash it is.

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