



THE INITIATION OF SARAH

Directed by Robert Day
(1978) Arrow Video Blu-ray

The TV movie *The Initiation of Sarah* bears more than a superficial resemblance to Brian De Palma's brilliant adaptation of Stephen King's *Carrie* in its story of a young woman gifted (cursed?) with telekinetic powers, boasting one or two sequences that could have been lifted straight from the earlier film, but, when it comes to its themes, its real concerns lie elsewhere. The emphasis here is not on the narrow, intolerant nature of religious fanaticism. This is a film about mothers and daughters, sisters and

sisterhood, and the dual nature of human beings.

The movie involves a number of transitions and rites of passage. It opens with Sarah Goodwin (Kay Lenz) and her sister, Patty (Morgan Brittany), leaving for college. As their mother, Mrs. Goodwin (Kathryn Grant) sees them off, two things become crystal clear: Sarah is adopted, and Mrs. Goodwin clearly expects little from her college career. It's almost as though Sarah isn't even really there. Arriving at fictitious Waltham College, the sisters intend to pledge sororities rather than live humdrum lives in the dorms.

It develops that there is a deep-seated rivalry between the two very different sororities that eventually accept Sarah and Patty. The only sorority that will have plain Sarah is Phi Epsilon Delta, derisively referred to as "Pigs, Elephants, and Dogs" by the mean girls at Alpha Nu Sigma, who of course promptly offer pledge status to pretty Patty. The differences are encoded in the very sorority houses themselves: ANS's house is bright and colorful, while PED dwell in a broody Gothic manse that's all turrets, dark wood staircases, and stained-glass windows. On another level, the dichotomy can be articulated as beauty versus brains, surface versus depth, exclusion versus inclusivity.

The idea of duality is raised directly in a psych class, where TA Paul Yates (Tony Bill) peppers his students with questions about their psychological contradictions. Sarah wants to know whether someone who is possessed of a dark power can also be a good human being, thereby supplying the film with its central moral conundrum. The answer eventually turns out to be yes, but the cost for maintaining ethical decency proves to be extremely high for Sarah.

Contrasting with Sarah's indifferent adoptive mother is the PED housemother, Mrs. Erica Hunter (Shelley Winters), who glancingly suggests at one point that she may be Sarah's own biological mother. At any rate, she wishes to yield matriarchal power over Sarah, guiding her in how to channel her powers, to corral her emotions into productive results. It all comes to a climax in the Hell Night initiation, where the film doubles down on its supernatural elements, introducing another sort of rite of passage, one that involves diabolism and human sacrifice. This contrasts humorously with the rather anodyne rite being performed at ANS, which involves eating "cat's eyes" (read: grapes) while blindfolded.

The Initiation of Sarah ends with an act of amicable inclusivity. Patty, disgusted with the bullying shenanigans of Jennifer (Morgan Fairchild) and her ANS sisters, defects to PED, taking up residence in Sarah's old room at the invitation of Sarah's best friend, Mouse (Tisa Farrow). This coda is imbued with an air of melancholy, but it at least bodes well for Patty's moral development. Fittingly, the final shot shows a framed photograph of Patty and Sarah, indicating that the bonds of sisterhood may be fluid, but they can be negotiated with the right intentions.

Arrow offers *The Initiation of Sarah* in a new 2K scan from the original camera negative that looks superb. The 1.33:1 full frame image is crystal clear. Colors are deep and rich, fine details of costume and décor stand out nicely, shadowy blacks look suitably inky, and grain levels never get too thick or unruly. The Master Audio mono track sounds just fine, with next to nothing in the way of hiss or other distortions, and it nicely puts across Johnny Harris's atmospheric score.

Extras include a commentary track from TV film historian Amanda Reyes, who does an outstanding job when it comes to providing information on the production history, the careers of cast and crew members, and the development of the telefilm genre. She also mentions the titles (and sometimes provides brief synopses) of dozens of TV movies that you wish were more readily available. The featurette "Welcome to Hell Week: A Pledge's Guide to *The Initiation of Sarah*" has Stacie Ponder and Anthony Hudson, co-hosts of the *Gaylords of Darkness* podcast, gushing in a jokey and often punning fashion about their love for the film.

In the video essay "Cracks in the Sisterhood," film critic and historian Alexandra Heller-Nicholas goes into the many meanings of the term "sisterhood" in the film, how it develops themes of ritual and transformation, and how all this relates to Second Wave feminism and then-current sociopolitical developments. "The Intimations of Sarah" has film critic Samantha McLaren talking about how TV executives used hot button issues and "Jiggle TV" elements to woo viewers back to television in the 1970s, the influence of *Carrie* on *The Initiation of Sarah*, and suggestions of a queer relationship between Sarah and Mouse throughout the film. "The Initiation of Tom" features writer-director Tom Holland talking about this as his first credit, his early years as an actor alongside the likes of Harrison Ford and Al Pacino, doing commercials, and how his story ideas (in particular a bizarre shapeshifting finale) were altered on the way to a shootable script.

Budd Wilkins



AN'S CHILDREN
ed by Joe Wiezyck
(1975) AGFA/
Something Weird Video Blu-

Something Weird Video Blu-

Perverse grindhouse fare with questionable sexual politics, *Satan's Children* is regional filmmaking at its weirdest and most unpredictable. Star White is Bobby Douglas, a pale faced teenager with a troubled home, his confidence destroyed by mean-

stepsister and tyrant father. After a particular nasty encounter with sis, Bobby decides to make a run and escapes his house. He arrives despondent at a diner and is picked up by a charismatic stranger—which leads to him being left for following a gang rape incident. It's at this time that the viewer realizes they're not in for any semblance of predictability with this picture.

The Satan worshippers suggested by the title make their appearance here. At first, Bobby is a sexual plaything for a female member who arguably tries to turn him "straight", but he's in for a rude awakening when the cult leader—The Master—returns from a pilgrimage. The Master digs his heels into payback for both the female Satan worshiper and Bobby, but Bobby miraculously makes an escape, the ending taking us back to the start with a reenergized Bobby ready to take his revenge on father and sis.

One of the oddest through lines in *Satan's Children* is its attitude towards homosexuals—The Master is quite dismissive of gay men, it's vaguely derogatory if you take the picture and don't consider the source it came from. It can make the hair stand up on your head to listen to some of this dialogue and witness the horrific action afflicted our young hero Bobby. It's really not politically correct and one should know better going in.

Satan's Children does track in the trendy Manson and Satanic Panic ethos that were so newsworthy and sold a lot of paperbacks back in the time the picture came out. Stand-up citizens were captivated to read about supposed ritual killings and strange sexual acts. It contrasted against their more rather mundane lives. Was such aberrant behavior transplanted in Middle America just outside the margins of more comfortably lived lives? Vincent Bugliosi's *Helter Skelter* (both non-fiction book and television film) delved into some of this, really playing up the carnal freak aspects that were, in actuality, really just made for shock attention purposes.

Released as a co-title on a Something Weird DVD for *Asylum* and *Satan* (helmed by William Girdler) back in the early 2000s, *Satan's Children* caught people's attention for how truly disturbing, bizarre, and out-of-left-field it really is. The narrative cannot be predicted, and it's a title where you question whether it's really going the direction you think it is. The idyllic sun-bleached location photography of Florida makes for an odd counterpoint to the sinister goings-on of *Satan's Children*, but the incongruent atmosphere helps to sell it.

Although previously released to Blu-ray in 2019, AGFA has done some color correction for this new 2022 edition. There are several extras, including an audio commentary by film historian Elizabeth Purchell and AGFA's Bret Berg. It's a track that captures the strange sexual politics and sense of regional filmmaking that go into making something so extraordinarily bizarre. Purchell does a great job navigating the minefield of the odd sexual politics on display.

Next up is a 2014 panel reunion Q&A with actors Rosemary Orlan, John Edwards, Makeup artist John MocSary and sound recordist Tom Dudley. Some viewers may think they all look a bit embarrassed to be associated with such a project, but all seem to field the questions from the moderator, taking it in good stride. For almost all the participants, *Satan's Children* was the one-and-done film on their resumes—none have had long careers, so this is really their moment in the spotlight. They relive the horrors of low-budget filmmaking and the ways in which they'd give themselves over to the filmmakers asking them to work weekends for very little pay.

Some short subjects of the satanic variety—*Satan in Church: My Place is Safe* (animated) and *Boys Beware, Evil Is Everywhere*—heave round out the disc. These shorts also show how prevalent the satanic vibes were in the air circa the early 1970s. Warnings for children and those faith parishioners who couldn't consider such unholy acts as transgressions.

As for the transfer for *Satan's Children*, it's never looked as good as with bright, popping colors and a clear soundtrack—an entirely different picture than it would have looked in its open-matte presentation on the now antiquated Something Weird disc.

Aaron Graban