

4K Conan

From an age long passed when special effects were practical and action films took great pauses between scenes of energy comes John Milius' 1982 adaptation so hewn to its pulp source that its cinematic prose lacks even the remotest hint of poetry, Conan the Barbarian. The ascendant Arnold Schwarzenegger was ideally cast as the brawny hero of few words, driven by vengeful impulses, but Milius's leaden staging is dependent more than anything else upon Basil Poledouris's grandly executed musical score. The film has varying running times depending upon how much sex and gore was allowed in a particular viewing area, but the most fetching version is the longest, at 130 minutes. It is ideal viewing for a rainy Saturday afternoon because its very structure harkens to a comforting nostalgia for long forgotten motion picture adventures. Indeed, more than anything else, the Dino Di Laurentiis and Raffaella Di Laurentiis Universal production is reminiscent of the Italian muscleman films that had proliferated in Italy a couple of decades previously.

The film is slow moving and has an insipid plot—set in a pre-technological era, it begins with the origin story and then shifts to a quest to retrieve an abducted princess from the same villain (played with genuine flair by James Earl Jones) who had murdered the hero's parents—but as a veneration of masculinity, the film's expressions of self-importance are irresistible to anyone who longs for a posture, however phony, of motion picture grandeur. And to this end, the two-platter Universal Arrow Video 4K Blu-ray release (UPC#76013714-1556, \$60) is an ideal vessel from which to sip the film's strained nourishments. For one thing, the sweet bass on the wonderful Dolby Atmos audio track strikes lovingly at the viewer's heart, and then spreads Poledouris's orchestrations throughout the circulation. If the film's lethargy is deadening, then the musical score makes it a comfortable, pleasant death. The accuracy of the movie's color transfer reinforces the film's antiquity both as a depiction of a world where people live in huts and the only shiny items are the occasional stolen jewels, and as an era where slick and shiny were not a priority in Hollywood production designs, but accurate griminess and impoverishment were not a priority, either. The impossibly phony sets look even more impossibly phony thanks to the accuracy of the color transfer, which could easily decompose into blandness if something other than the 4K format were in control of their delivery to the screen.

Mako, Gerry Lopez and Sandahl Bergman co-star. Max von Sydow has a single scene as a guest star and is also a welcome, enlivening figure. The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1. The three versions of the film are available on the platter, the *Theatrical Version*, which runs 126 minutes, the *International Version*, which runs 129 minutes, and the *Extended Version*, which runs 130 minutes. Except for the academically obsessed (the *Theatrical Version* has a different and more appealing end title card—in addition to the sex and violence, the longer versions have some talky sequences that were trimmed for the initial release), the latter version is the only presentation anyone will be interested in. All three have the Dolby Atmos track (although they default to a mono track) and are accompanied by optional English subtitles. A two-channel DTS presentation of the isolated musical score is also available over the *Extended Version*, along with a commentary with Milius and Schwarzenegger, which was featured on Universal's DVD (Jun 00) and is hard to resist because of its star power and generally informative content.

Conan chronicler Paul Sammon was on the set and shares an extensive talk on a second commentary over the *Extended Version* about the history of the Conan character, the backgrounds of the players, and how the film was staged. It is an excellent discourse, both detailed and continually interesting. "Conan is crucified and is dying of hunger and thirst, and a vulture lands on him and starts to peck at him, and he has just enough strength left to bite the bird on its neck and break its neck. Right out of one of the Robert E. Howard stories. The 'Tree of Woe' was on a turntable so that they could rotate this whole prop and keep the sun basically in view as much as they could during the daylight hours. Arnold was sitting on a bicycle seat which was hidden by his loincloth, and he was not really, of course, nailed to the tree, but he had these appliances that looked like thongs and nails at his feet and his hands, but his weight was supported on the seat itself. As for the vultures, when you see them in wide shot, those are real vultures that were supposed to be 'trained,' but what they were doing during and between shots is they somehow would slip out of the tethers that were holding them onto the tree and they would hop off the tree and try to get away. They were constantly having to stop and put the buzzards back, the live ones. The one that pecks at Arnold, that he then bites into its neck, was a puppet, however, cable controlled, operated by people from outside of frame. Funny thing was, is that they did detail it with feathers from a real dead vulture and the thing was always being sprayed with Lysol to keep it disinfected, which meant that Arnold was having to bite into something that wasn't that pleasant, and then between shots, just to make sure there was no bacteria spread, he was given a very strong mouthwash."

The film has also been released as a standard Blu-ray (UPC#760137141563, \$50), which is not quite as sharply detailed, dulling its blade a touch, and has an equally less impactful audio, although otherwise the two platters are identical.

A second standard Blu-ray platter, which comes with both releases, contains 5 minutes of deleted scenes and a 53-minute retrospective documentary that both originally appeared on the DVD. It also has a fantastic section dedicated entirely to Poledouris that features a terrific 47-minute orchestral

performance of the musical score in front of a live audience conducted by Poledouris in 5.1-channel Dolby Digital sound; an excellent 36-minute retrospective profile of Poledouris that includes interviews with his family, directors he had worked with, his collaborators and film music experts ("[The music for] Conan was not appreciated at the time it was released in 1982. If it was appreciated at all, it was by a handful of film music buffs. The problem was this spectacular piece of orchestral and choral music was attached to a film that was completely misunderstood by the American critical establishment. And that's why—it's a shame now in retrospect—the music was not fully appreciated, not listed on anyone's honors list for that year, but today, with the passage of time, we now see what a classic it was. The problem was the American critical establishment did not understand the sword and sorcery genre, which John Milius had translated so well into film and which Basil had captured so brilliantly with his music."); and includes a posthumous tribute to his accomplishments; a very nice 15-minute production documentary about the concert, primarily containing footage of Poledouris speaking to the musicians at the rehearsal (it was the first time he had conducted the music since the film was made); and a 4-minute montage of still photos from the event, set, of course, to Poledouris's music (but for Lonesome Dove).

Additionally, there are four trailers; a cute 3-minute musical tribute combining clips from the film with a jokey song about the hero's experiences; a 2-minute special effects comparison clip of one specific scene; more than a hundred promotional and production photos in still frame; a fantastic 12-minute montage of more production photos, promotional artwork and conceptual artwork; an excellent 14-minute interview with concept artist William Stout about the time he spent working on the film; a decent 13-minute interview with costumer John Bloomfield about becoming involved in the production and the approach he took to the designs; 11 minutes of intercut recollections from effects men Colin Arthur and Ron Hone about the various physical effects staged in the film; a cool 7-minute interview with co-star Jorge Sanz who played Schwarzenegger's character as a child talking about what a great time he had; a 7-minute interview with co-star Jack Taylor, going into detail about his one scene with Schwarzenegger; a 9-minute interview editor Peck Prior talking about the monumental task of putting all of the footage together; 7 minutes of intercut interviews with visual effects experts Peter Kuran and Katherine Kean going over the nature of the challenge before computers took over; a great 6-minute piece with Robert Eggers about his affection for the film and its milieu, and how it bled into his career; an excellent 17-minute interview with Conan historian John Walsh about the production's background, and how it has influenced other films; Milius expert Alfio Leotta providing a good 17-minute analysis of the film in relation to Milius's other features; a good 18-minute introduction to Howard and the film; an elaborate 15-minute piece on making the swords in the film; a great 10-minute collection of promotional interviews for the film with Schwarzenegger, Milius and Bergman; and 35 minutes of original promotional featurettes, which are in pretty bad condition (the upper part of the image is sometimes warped) but are filled with wonderful, fresh looks at the effort going into making the film.

Richard Fleischer's 1984 sequel, Conan The Destroyer, is a better, more entertaining and much less important film. Mako returns with Schwarzenegger, joined by Grace Jones, Wilt Chamberlain (why wasn't he in more movies?) and Olivia D'Abo. Another De Laurentiis Universal production, the film has been released by Arrow as a 4K Blu-ray (UPC#760137141570, \$60) and a standard Blu-ray (UPC#760137141587, \$50), and has also been bundled with its predecessor in a three-platter 4K Blu-ray set The Conan Chronicles Conan The Barbarian Conan The Destroyer (UPC#760137141594, \$90) and as a standard three-platter Blu-ray set, (UPC#760137141600, \$80). Running 103 minutes, the heroes go on another quest, traveling one place to get one doodad, going to another place to get another doodad, and then bringing the second doodad back to activate an ancient but dormant monster. The film is a great deal of fun, with better effects than the first movie, more fights and action scenes, and brisker moments between each major sequence. It is standing on the shoulders of the first movie, of course, but from there, it is a much better view.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1 and the color transfer is impeccable. With cinematography by Jack Cardiff, hues are also brighter and more solid compared to Duke Callaghan's work on the first film, and while it might not have been appropriate for that movie, it is appropriate for this one and contributes to the entertainment. There is another Dolby Atmos soundtrack, but it does not have the dimensionality or developed bass response that the first movie has. For the most part, the audio is centered and bland. The film has another elaborate Poledouris musical score, in which he effectively adds to the suspense in one sequence by using, up to a point, a bolero, but overall, because of the dullness of the after-the-fact audio enhancement, the music does not have as much of an impact as it has on the first film. A special features option plays the film with just the music. There are optional English subtitles.

The disc's supplement contains two trailers; a nice collection of memorabilia in still frame; a good 5-minute interview with casting director Johanna Ray who goes over how the principal supporting players were chosen; an interesting 9-minute interview with costume designer John Bloomfield about clothing the various cast members; a nice 15-minute interview with art director Kevin Phipps, who was working on the David Lynch Dune at pretty much the same time, and how much fun he had doing them on top of each other ("Conan was just kind of a light, frothy dessert after quite a robust main course."); an enjoyable 13-minute interview with stuntman Vic Armstrong who talks about

working with the cast (Chamberlain was bored when not shooting; Jones didn't understand the concept of pulling your punches) and his subsequent work with Schwarzenegger; a 10-minute thumbnail summary of the production by film historian John Walsh, also talking about the proposed sequels; an excellent 14-minute interview with screenwriters Roy Thomas and Gerry Conway, who began by writing the Marvel comic book Conan adaptations before graduating to screenwriting; and—film composers give invariably rewarding talks—Poledouris supplying a very worthwhile 17-minute explanation of his approach to the film and how composing for film works in general.

Additionally, the film is accompanied by a whopping four commentary tracks.

Fleischer supplies a very good talk on one track, breaking down each sequence and talking about his work with the actors, his pride for the film's special effects, and his approach to the movie. "I felt in the first film his body was covered too often and too many times, and the whole idea of having Arnold in the film was to show this magnificent build that he's got, this great structure of muscles and sinews. It's very startling. There's nobody in the world built like that guy, and I didn't want to cover it, so I took his clothes off and he plays no scenes wearing any appreciable amount of clothing, but it pays off because in some of those scenes where the character needs tremendous strength and muscle, you see it. You understand it and it's not faked."

The second track has intercut reminiscence from d'Abo and co-star Tracey Walter, who both describe working with the other members of the cast (particularly Chamberlain) and Fleischer, explain what their characters want to achieve, and go over what was happening behind the scenes during individual sequences. Walter also talks extensively about his successful career as a character actor and how much fun he had making the film.

Sammon was also on the set of **Destroyer** and provides a more comprehensive talk about the production and its history on his track, as well as going over other Conan projects, and even talking about his own career and how it has been influenced by the material.

Finally, there is a track that features reflections upon the film and its history by the always entertaining movie enthusiasts, Kim Newman and Stephen Jones, who are also fortunate to be joined by Fleischer's **Superman** villain, Sarah Douglas, who plays the villain here, as well. It is Douglas who steals the talk, full of witty recollections about her awkward costumes, her subsequent lifelong friendship with Jones, her asking Chamberlain if he played 'net ball,' her career as a whole (a number of **Superman** anecdotes, of course, and an amazing, spellbinding soliloquy about becoming famous in Hollywood), her humor (which Americans do not understand) and her describing a scene that was eliminated in which she is in bed with Schwarzenegger. "I kept my crown on and he kept his sword on, and it got quite hot in there. I can remember it was a very slippery, slippery business because he was very oiled up in bed and I was—you're not laughing at me, are you?—but it's true, we had quite a passionate thing, and all sorts of people asked me to find out all sorts of things, which I did, and I can give you all the details you want, later."

Milius was an exceptional director. His films are consistently unique and ambitious. With modern sensibilities, he made grand, old-fashioned movies not beholden to science fiction or fantasy (even **Conan**, in this regard, was a groundbreaking film), and each of his films, no matter how flawed (they were all flawed), can be cherished for its fresh perspective and its majesty.

Unlike any surfing movie ever made, Milius's 1978 Warner Bros. historical drama stretching across the Sixties and into the beginning of the Seventies, **Big Wednesday**, channels John Ford better than anyone not making a western has ever channeled him. It traces the lives of three men, bonded by their love of surfing, from the end of their adolescence to the beginning of their midlife adulthood, over the course of four demarcated chapters ostensibly representing the seasons but also advancing by 3 years between each of the first three segments and then 6 years to the final segment. Running 120 minutes, it is partially the film's exceptionality that makes it so compelling. Milius is obsessed with capturing both the surfing culture and the social atmosphere of each period, and that obsession pulses through every frame. The film is superbly edited, selling the idea that the stars are surfing and that big waves are rolling into the beach as they roll in. And then the core of the movie is a lovely three-way story of friendship, carousing and gradual maturation. Two of the film's three primary stars, Jan-Michael Vincent and Gary Busey, ended up with lives that patterned the worst excesses of their characters, so much so that you barely realize the characters actually grow out of it. The film is sort of like **Gidget**, sure, but writ large and without regard for target marketing. It is beautiful, massive and novel-like, curling with a consistently smooth humor and yet always cognizant an ever-present dark undertow.

William Katt also stars, with Patti D'Arbanville, Lee Purcell, Sam Melville and Barbara Hale, along with briefer appearances by Joe Spinell, Gerry Lopez, Robert Englund and Ford favorite Hank Worden. The film is available on Blu-ray from Warner Home Video as a *WB Archive Collection* title (UPC#888574644826, \$22), a follow up to the DVD we reviewed in Aug 02. Letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1, the picture quality is just marginally improved, but the DTS two-channel stereo sound is a significant upgrade over the DVD's stereo track. The audio's dimensionality is intermittent, but on the BD, Poledouris's score has a very satisfying presence, and the directional sound effects are more pronounced. While the range is limited—we

long for an enhanced bass on both the music and the sound effects during the final surfing sequence—the mix still contributes to the film's epic feel. As for the picture, while it looks fine and the colors are fresh, it lacks the crispness that the best BD transfers achieve, and could really benefit from another run. There are optional English subtitles. Milius supplied a commentary track for the DVD, ruminating about the film's autobiographical components but also talking about the production logistics and challenges, and it has been carried over, along with a trailer. Additionally, a 15-minute retrospective interview with Milius has been included that pretty much reiterates the highlights of what he said in the commentary and also reflects upon the sadly myopic reception the film initially received.

Fleischer landed the **Destroyer** job because he had a better track record than Milius, and he did make a couple of genuine classics, along with several terrifically entertaining films and several notorious bombs. His forays into science-fiction and fantasy were an equally mixed bag, but we owe him an apology for shortchanging his 1973 MGM sci-fi feature, **Soylent Green**, when we reviewed the DVD in Nov 93. We have always lumped the film as a poor excuse for science fiction, along the lines of *Damnation Alley* and **Logan's Run**, but revisiting the Warner Blu-ray (UPC#883929174126, \$20), we found there was a great deal to admire about both the film's execution and its prophetic value.

Dig this. The movie is set in 2022. Charlton Heston's character is complaining because, due to what we now refer to as climate change, it is ninety degrees at night, something that doesn't sound the least bit unusual these days. Fleischer manages to use common locations and contemporary backlot street sets with minimal alterations, conveying a believably deteriorating future by emphasizing the rot of the present. He does employ a haze for the outdoor daylight sequences that is handled particularly well on the BD, so that rather than looking like a crummy transfer the way the DVD did, the idea that the air really isn't fit for breathing is readily communicated. Leigh Taylor-Young earns a chuckle when you first see her because she is playing a video game on a console that may have been state-of-the-art in 1973 but it sure ain't *Grand Theft Auto*, yet she's given real thought to the manner of her character—referred to by men as 'furniture' that comes with a fancy apartment—and how much humanity can peep through her acquiescent façade. Basically, Fleischer understands the limitations of taking on a major studio science-fiction film, and so he pieces out the valid ideas and dresses up the decoration as best he can to sell them.

His success can be demonstrated in that, like **The Stepford Wives**, the film's title has entered the general lexicon and is understood by people who have never seen the film. Fortunately, Fleischer understood how to use it. The revelation at the end of the movie is a way to end the story, but the satisfaction of the film is the portrait of the future that it creates along the way, as Heston's character haphazardly investigates the murder of a prominent citizen played by the all-too-briefly seen Joseph Cotten. (Taylor-Young is his 'furniture'/mistress and Chuck Connors plays his bodyguard). Heston's partner is not a fellow cop, but an elderly researcher played rather magnificently by Edward G. Robinson in his final screen appearance. There are simple but effective action scenes, a few pleasing moments of eroticism, and a mingling of tantalizing interior designs and horrifying impressions of overpopulation. It is the dichotomy of humanity presented by Taylor-Young and Robinson's characters, however, with Heston caught in the middle and trying to make sense not just of the murder but of how he fits into humankind, that is where Fleischer draws out the richness of the film's science-fiction perspective upon the human experience. The film begins with a montage of photographs first from the Nineteenth Century and then from the early Twentieth Century as the photos advance, in anticipation of **Koyaanisqatsi**, to the crowded chaos of the production's present day. We all, as we age, look upon childhood as a more idyllic time. With Nature now receding, it is a literal effect in addition to being a psychological axiom. Whether we will end up polluting the oceans so badly that there are no longer fish in the sea and we will have to turn elsewhere for nourishment remains to be seen, but there is a blatant progression in the process of aging that appears to be affecting the globe as much as the people who live on it. The term inspired by the film's title is alive and well, and is not going anywhere any time soon.

Also featured are Whit Bissell, Brock Peters, Paula Kelly and Dick Van Patten. The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1. As we mentioned, the hazes can be challenging, but the picture transfer is very nice, with sharp details and accurate flesh tones. The monophonic sound is clear. There are alternate French, Spanish and German audio tracks, optional English, French ("Soylent Vert est fait de gens!"), Spanish ("El Soylent Green está hecho con seres humanos.") and German ("Soylent Green wird aus Menschen gemacht.") subtitles and, carried over from the DVD along with a trailer, are two promotional featurettes running a total of 15 minutes, including a nice segment on Robinson. Fleischer and Taylor-Young also had a commentary on the DVD that has been retained, which has a few interesting points but struggles to fill the movie's 97-minute running time.

Fleischer's admirable 1969 attempt to turn the story of Che Guevara into a Hollywood action adventure film, **Che!**, was released on Blu-ray by 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment and Twilight Time (UPC#811956020109). Omar Sharif was cast as Guevara, and Jack Palance plays Fidel Castro. Cesare Danova, Robert Loggia, Woody Strode and others co-star, but also present

themselves as 'witnesses' for the camera, in character, recalling Guevara's personality and efforts. The film was a terrible bomb at the boxoffice, but it runs a merciful 96 minutes, lets you know right at the beginning how he dies, and becomes a workable mix of guerilla battle sequences and a treatise on the strengths and failings of revolution theory. Fleischer genuinely tries to depict the truth of both Guevara's successes and his failures, but it was not a topic that was acceptable at the time and was frowned upon by people placed in charge of the public's tastes. Sharif does a good job physically, his character constantly wheezing from asthma as he pushes his way forward through the jungle and up hillsides. There is no dramatic center to his character's life—the only movie that truly captured that was **Motorcycle Diaries** (Apr 05)—but that is where Fleischer's skills come forward. It is a decent, and different, Saturday afternoon action film, with sporadic explosions and gunfights, and while you are absorbing all of that, especially if you know nothing about Guevara beforehand, it provides a vivid and memorable thumbnail sketch of how he rose to success in Cuba, and then frittered it away in the mountains of Bolivia, because the first country was crowded, compact and had sharp divisions between the rich and the poor, while the second was expansive, sparsely populated, and pretty much just had poor people. Without an object of resentment to focus upon, they began resenting Guevara instead.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1. The color transfer looks terrific. Once in a while, a passage will seem a touch light or grainy, but on the whole, fleshtones are accurate and the image is spotless. The monophonic sound is strong, but better yet, Guevara's fellow Argentinian Lalo Schiffrin's musical score is presented on an isolated track with a vivid two-channel stereo playback that makes it worth watching the film a second time, just for the music and the silent action scenes. There are optional English subtitles, a trailer, a TV commercial and a really good 6-minute promotional featurette that includes footage of the real Guevara and Castro, and some terrific behind-the-scenes footage from shooting in Puerto Rico.