

Updated literary horror

An admirably conceived, very low budget horror film, Rudyard Kipling's Mark of the Beast, has been released by Blood Bath Pictures (UPC#760137554998, \$10). Although set in New England (it was shot in Connecticut) in the present day, the 2012 film deliberately makes use of the tone and idioms of Kipling's writing. So it's sort of Kipling by way of H.P. Lovecraft. The transition that is achieved with this is just plain brilliant, so that while the film is dealing with standard horror concepts such as zombies and possession, it seems completely new. The special effects are also smartly executed for a minimal price, and there are several well-staged scares. On the downside, the film looks homemade, with carefully chosen but too limited video camera placements, and performances that are game, but regional theater at best. It also lasts just an hour, stretched to a 72-minute running time with lots of opening and closing credits.

In the woods, a good ways out of town, some twenty-somethings gather for a party at a cop's house. One of them gets too drunk, but lives nearby on a path through the woods. A couple of his companions try to help walk him home, but they pass a mysterious shrine and the drunk defaces it. He is immediately attacked and bitten by a leper. His friends drag him back to the cop's house, but the next day he is in a confused state and bites another companion himself. It goes on from there, forcing the characters to make some very strong moral decisions that give the film genuine dramatic depth. The running time is actually an advantage, especially if you scroll through the opening credits and get right to the story, because the action moves briskly and decisively once things get started, and the premise does not wear out its welcome. Viewers who are looking for a slick exercise in thrills should go elsewhere, but those with an appreciation of literary endeavors and the honorable tradition of foot-in-the-door, low budget horror filmmaking may be pleasantly surprised.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.78:1 and an accommodation for enhanced 16:9 playback. The image is a little soft, with weak contrasts at times and deliberately placed scratches to give it a makeshift atmosphere. Colors are generally fresh, and the transfer is undoubtedly accurate. The music has a mild dimensionality and the sound is reasonably strong. There is no captioning. A decent 11-minute production featurette is included, along with two standard trailers and two trailers that were created as part of a 'student editing contest.' Co-directors Jon Gorman and Tom Seymour provide a commentary track. They say nothing about how they split their director duties, but otherwise provide a worthwhile talk, explaining how the story was developed, what went into the brief shoot and how the other members of the cast and crew contributed.