

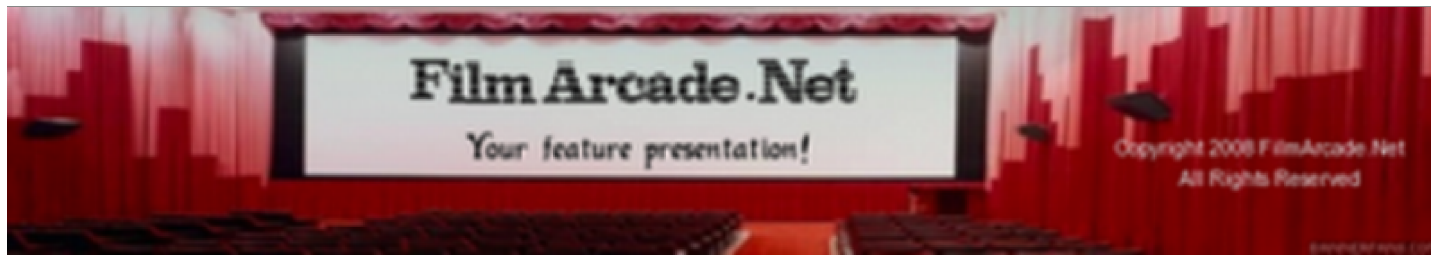
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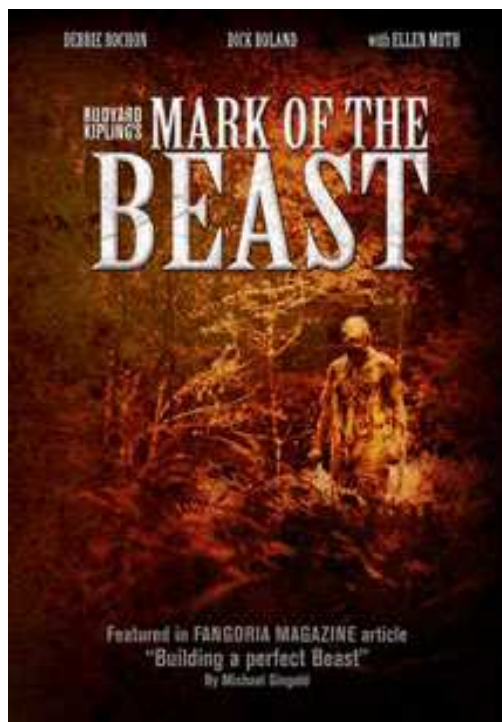
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## "Mark of the Beast" Review -Written by Nathan Hamilton

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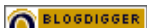


I hate to admit it, but before seeing this flick, I was not familiar with Rudyard Kipling's horror stories. I knew Riki Tiki Tavi. That has snakes, so it qualifies as horror in my book. I didn't know about his actual tales of terror though. I decided to look the story up and read it online before watching the movie, and it's excellent. I recommend it to all of you. I'm gonna have to check out Mr. Jungle Book's other fright fare. Now, let's see if the movie can live up to its lofty literary lineage.

Synopsis (as it appears on the back cover): The famous horror story by Rudyard Kipling comes to life in is this classic retelling starring Ellen Muth (Dead Like Me Showtime Series) and Independent film legend Debbie Rochon. It is the tale of two heroes who lose their way fighting off a faceless silver leper in the woods. This haunting yet moral tale shows the repercussions for the use of torture and has deep political and religious themes.

Right off the bat, I have to call Mark of the Beast out on what just may be the worst fake film grain I've ever seen. I think they were trying for an old school throwback look, but the end result isn't the kind of "old school" they wanted. I'm about to date myself here, but who remembers bootleg VHS? Ok, a couple of us. Remember when you'd get a fourth or fifth generation copy of something and it was just frustrating to watch? This looked like a digital version of that. They also used a sepia-ish color filter that sometimes almost worked and sometimes, um...didn't. The flick would have looked a lot better, and been a lot more enjoyable, if they had just left well enough alone in the picture department.

What makes that veneer of crap you have to watch through is that underneath it,



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Mark of the Beast is a good flick. It sports some first-class acting. Of course Debbie Rochon is good in everything she does, but this is the best performance I've seen from her in a while. It's different from the over the top characters she often plays. It's a very naturalistic performance, and she pulls it off beautifully. Watching her in a more traditional role really emphasized just what a great actress she is. Phil Hall, as Fleete, constantly flirts with going off the "over-acting" cliff, but manages to walk that fine line and hit the perfect pitch for the character. Dick Boland brings an appropriate awkwardness to his character. The supporting cast are all capable, but to be honest, it's tough to speak too much about them because so little was done with them. We'll come back to that later though.

The film has a nice "dark fairy tale" aura that's built through a combination of factors. I'm not sure where this was filmed, but it's freaking gorgeous. The natural backdrop is outstanding. I definitely need to go camping there. Sometimes you forget how much a really great outdoor location can add to a movie's production value. Another detail that is often overlooked is the score, and Mark of the Beast has a good one. It may be a little overdramatic at times, but it definitely adds a lot of ambiance. The choice to have voice over narration directly from the story itself was risky and could have come off quite cheesy, but it works. The juxtaposition of the anachronistic words introducing the more modern action give the feeling that we're watching a parable. Since the filmmakers were indeed trying to make a symbolic statement, that was a smart move.

Special kudos are also due to the makeup department. The silver leper is a cool looking character. It almost looks like a new twist on a Fulci zombie, but not quite. The choice to leave no visible facial features was, again, risky. Again, however, it paid off. He has a unique, intriguing look that I dug a lot.

Where this movie unfortunately falls down is in the progression of the story. If you subtract the longest, slowest credits sequences imaginable, Mark clocks in at 63 minutes. Even with that slim running time, there are spots where it gets kinda slow and feels a little padded. What's frustrating about that is the inclusion of background characters who are never really used. At one point there's a party going on, and there are about 10 people who show up out of nowhere and disappear just as suddenly. The biggest missed opportunity was with the characters of Natalie (Ellen Muth) and Maggie (Margaret Rose Champagne). In the beginning, it looks like they are going to be major players in the story. There's even a little bit of a romance teased between Natalie and one of the main characters. Instead, nothing much is done with them and they become afterthoughts. What I don't get is why they were added in the first place. They're not in the original story. They should have either not added the extra characters and made a 45 minute short, which would have been great, or explored their subplots, given them more to do, and gotten a feature's worth of story. That would have been great too. As it stands, I've definitely seen slower, and the short running time keeps it from dragging, but I wanted a little more plot-wise. To be fair though, I have seen movies with a lot more story that were a lot less entertaining.

Random Thought #1: That has got to be the most confusing DVD menu I have ever seen. If it takes more than about 10 seconds to find "play," then there's a problem. Random Thought #2: A message to all independent filmmakers - If you want to look professional, then for the love of all things unholy, proofread the back of the damn box before sending it to the printers! Hell, send it to me and I'll do it.

Random Thought #3: "I may be a Christian, but if God ain't helping out on this one, he's just gonna have to forgive me while I beat up a cripple in the woods" is an early contender for my favorite movie line of the year.

Rudyard Kipling's Mark of the Beast, despite a couple of big missteps, is an entertaining flick that definitely has its independent horror heart in the right place. I'm honestly shocked that no one has adapted this particular story before. It was a brilliant choice. Sure, the adaptation is a little thin. Sure they fell into that "awful looking fake grain" trap that ensnares more and more filmmakers these days. But you have some really good performances, damn near breathtaking scenery (and I'm not just talking about Ms. Rochon), a cool monster, and a really effective atmosphere. Plus, it's got that intangible independent spirit where you can tell that the filmmakers were actually passionate about the project. In the end, can you really ask for anything more?