

WHITE ZOMBIE

Directed by Victor Halperin

(1932) Kino Entertainment Blu-ray/ DVD

Convinced by their friend Monsieur Beaumont (Robert Frazer) to marry at his Haitian plantation, naïve couple Madeleine (Madge Bellamy) and Neil (John Harron) arrive in a haunted paradise. During a coach ride, intended to call to mind the one that opened *Dracula* (1931), they happen upon a funeral where the superstitious locals chant to keep the dearly departed from rising from the dead. Their trip also sees them briefly encountering local zombie chieftain "Murder" Legendre (Bela Lugosi in one of his signature roles) who snatches away Madeleine's scarf. Once at Beaumont's gloomy manse—courtesy some familiar Gothic sets on loan from Universal Studios, their host's intentions become clear. He desires Madeleine for himself, and enlists the aid of Legendre to "zombie-fy" her. Slipping a potion into her wine, Madeleine keels over apparently dead at her wedding banquet. Spiriting her body away, Beaumont quickly finds the mute, piano-playing Madeleine to be a terrible bore and asks Legendre to change her back. Nothing doing, Legendre says, as he slips the same potion into Beaumont's drink, whereupon he begins to transform into one of the undead as well. Will the disconsolate Neil break away from his alcohol-fueled stupor to set things right and save his betrothed from a living death?

In spite of some impressive scenes, the words "classic" and "*White Zombie*" rarely appear in the same sentence. Blame lies squarely at the feet of the two male romantic leads Frazer and Harron, who can out-barnstorm Lugosi. Effeminate, melodramatic and ham-fisted, both Frazer and Harron's antics tie the film closer to such fare as Dwain Esper's *Maniac!* (1934), revealing *White Zombie*'s origins as a cheaply made, independently produced picture (Lugosi was reportedly only paid \$800 for his services). Bellamy's interpretation of a zombie—pounding out classical music on a piano, her eyes rolling towards the ceiling, her mouth in a tight angry frown appears, in retrospect to be a reaction to her fellow actors' performances.

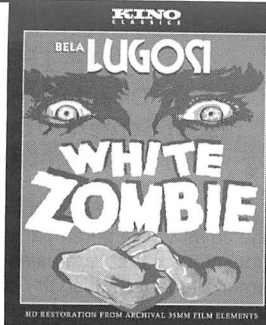
Judging by this feature, Victor Halperin appears to have been an inconsistent director. He does manage some scenes of outright screen terror, as in the mill scene where a zombie worker falls soundlessly into a vat to be ground away into sugar as his fellow zombie coworkers continue to grind away. It's a malefic, hellish scene calling to mind the robotic, faceless laborers beginning their shifts at the beginning of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1926). Halperin is out of his depth in later scenes, where he shows little knowledge of artfully placing subjects within a shot. In the climactic showdown on the staircase of the plantation, Lugosi appears at the extreme right of the frame, jutting up like a stick figure. Halperin also has pacing issues. Running a scant 69 minutes, the film seems at least *three times* as long.

Rarely screened on television due to its rather insensitive title—the plentiful "black zombies" in Haiti were apparently not newsworthy enough, *White Zombie* had long been plagued with degraded film elements and bad sound recording. The folks at Kino Video have stepped up to the fore with this sparkling restoration, with a razor-sharp image and clean audio. This works both for and against the film, as many scenes in the restored version emerge to having been shot against a plain, black studio backdrop.

White Zombie: Kino Classics' Remastered Edition on Blu-ray has a very interesting special feature: the raw, unrestored version of the film with all the scratches, scuffs and wrinkles intact is included as well. This writer is at a loss as to why several reviewers prefer this version to the restored one. Audiences for this film have for years strained to make out background detail and hear bits of dialogue. The only real value for this version's inclusion are for those nostalgic for the days when *White Zombie* was only available on bad quality public domain VHS tapes.

There is also a scholarly audio commentary by film historian and author Frank Thompson, who rightfully notes that Bellamy's transition into zombie-dom is sudden whereas Frazer's is long and drawn out, necessitating more hambone acting. A seven-minute filmed interview with Lugosi in his salad days is also included. In this extra, Lugosi comes off as an articulate individual, who even at the height of his fame in Hollywood knew of the limited opportunities it had for him. Backing this up is a trailer for the film's 1951 re-release, where the actor was still capable of drawing paying audiences into movie theaters but at that point in time was reduced to working for peanuts in regional theater revivals of "*Dracula*" and "*Arsenic and Old Lace*." An extensive photo gallery rounds out the gallery.

All in all, the Blu-ray is a spectacular restoration of a not-that-good film. A certain Rob Cummings from Massachusetts obviously felt otherwise, as he would take the name of this film to headline his metal band, eventually adopting the name of Rob Zombie, going on to produce his own horror films. It must also be noted that our current modern obsession with the undead, with all manner TV, film and book series owes more than just a little to this creaky, low-budget spookfest . . .



BATH SALT ZOMBIES

Directed by Dustin Wade Mills

(2012) MVD Visual DVD

There are plenty of bad horror films out there with bad actors, excruciatingly painful dialogue, poor writing, and elementary school attempts at gory make-up. *Bath Salt Zombies* is one of those films. In fact, this reprehensible attempt at a horror film makes the viewer wish for days gone by, when not everyone with a couple hundred dollars and a video camera could produce a film.

It was wishful thinking that this film might be about over-worked housewives who turn into the living dead after relaxing in a bath of Calgon. Far from it. The film most certainly takes its name from the news story that held the nation's collective attention for the requisite fifteen minutes a few months back. That story, and the gruesome pictures that followed it around the internet, concerned a man supposedly high on "bath salts" who then munched on another man's face.

Bath Salt Zombies is so low budget that the opening looks like one of those repeating computer-generated loops that play before the start button is pushed on a video game. The plot goes something like this: The government is cracking down on the use and distribution of bath salts, so an enterprising drug dealer pushes a potent form of the drug (in ordinary looking cigarettes) in order to take aim at the competition. Enter the lead character, Richie, a black nail polish wearing druggie whose girlfriend is none too happy that he has used up their supply of "salts."

So off Richie goes to the corner drug dealer, Bubbles. Yes, Bubbles the drug dealer. Bubbles, an impish fellow in glasses and a goatee, is as imposing as a lawn gnome—and about as tall. He sells Richie the good stuff, and in the very next scene Richie and some druggie girl (not Richie's girlfriend) get high on the intoxicatingly powerful salts. For fans of gratuitous nudity, this is worth the price of admission alone. The credits have not even officially rolled yet and this girl is stripping off her clothes, touching herself, and writhing around nude on the bed—all while Richie watches, contorting his face like Jim Carrey, as the extra strength bath salts take effect. He then rips the girl's face off, revealing some of the worst "torn-off-face" make-up ever, which resembles a cheap latex mask purchased several days after Halloween from the bargain bin at Wal-Mart.

Richie is nonetheless hooked and joneses constantly for his "cigarettes." Enter the subplot of the supposedly grizzled DEA agent who looks so young one must wonder if he even shaves yet. But this guy is tough. He takes out an entire gaggle of masked henchmen of the notorious "The Dragons" gang—also purveyors of a potent bath salt delight. Armed with a semi-automatic paint gun (the viewer is not sure if this weapon was really supposed to be an actual semi-automatic weapon or not) and his innate martial arts skill, the DEA agent wipes out the entire gang.

To say that the cast has very little acting experience is an understatement. Most lines are delivered with as much emotion, conviction, and gusto as if the characters were reading a grocery list. As the film lumbers along, Richie continues to abuse the bath salts, gets high with some friends, and they subsequently rampage a club—tearing off faces and ripping out guts and eating them. How can you tell when Richie or his buds is about to go bath salt berzerk? The make-up person smudges a little black around their eyes . . . and then a lot of red over the entire face.

There's more gratuitous nudity as Richie continues on his bath salt bender and kills his half naked girlfriend while she is in the shower. One can't help but wonder about the standards of these two "actresses" who succumbed to doing nude scenes in a film of this caliber. The allure certainly couldn't have been money or fame, unless of course they are holding out for appearances in *Bath Salt Zombies II: The Awakening*. Should such a sequel ever come to fruition, perhaps audiences may finally witness some actual zombies.

The one saving grace of this little gem is the setting. The film supposedly takes place in New York City. The viewer only knows this because some of the finest scenes are the occasional sweeping aerial views of The Big Apple. In the end, *Bath Salt Zombies* is most definitely a film that is best suited to watch with some recreational help. In that case, invite some friends over, buy a case of beer, and enjoy.



Greg Goodsell

David Krizmick