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The name Jim Wynorski is more than familiar to genre film fans. The director of nearly a hundred feature films under varying names, Wynorski is a figure that has reaped as much scorn from the fan community as he has praise, as his output is often derided as cheaply and uncaringly made, a sentiment that T&A quickies like **THE BREASTFORD FIVES** and **HOUSE ON HOOTER HILL** make it hard to defend against.

Often missed is the fact is that Wynorski genuinely loves the low-budget film world he's chosen to immerse himself in, something very evident in his first film, **THE LOST EMPIRE**, a goofy, loving tribute to the low-budget serial adventures of the past. Wynorski himself would be the first to admit that he's put out a lot of crap, and in the documentary **POPATOPOLIS**, following him during the filming of **THE WITCHES OF BREASTWICK**, he holds no pretensions that he's working

on a great piece of art. The sheer amount of crap may have damaged his brand (whether or not he uses a pseudonym, the genre fan will know a new Wynorski film), but the truth is that he is capable of making a genuinely fun, entertaining flick when he's doing something he loves.

TRANSYLVANIA TWIST, **THE RETURN OF SWAMP THING** and **DINOSAUR ISLAND** may not be fine art, but they're fun little movies with a playful voice, the type of work Wynorski can do well and doesn't do nearly often enough.



It's this unassumingly likeable quality that comes across in **GILA**, a remake of Ray Kellogg's 1959 drive-in classic **THE GIANT GILA MONSTER**, a title made notorious by years of easy availability (thanks to its public domain status) and airing on "Mystery Science Theater 3000." The original **GILA** is about as low-budget '50s teen monster movie that a low-budget '50s teen monster movie can get, with its sock hops, misunderstood teenagers, catchy songs and special effects involving a standard-sized gila monster unconvincingly playing a giant version of the same.

Now, the standard procedure with remakes of monster movies that are very representational of the eras in which they were made is to modernize them by treating them seriously and adding enough sex, violence and drama to sate the leering eyes of today's twerking teen-ager people. While Wynorski has previously used this tactic on remakes like 1988's **NOT OF THIS EARTH** and the made-for-Showtime **WASP WOMAN**, **GILA** takes the opposite tact and doesn't change a single thing. **GILA** is set in the same small-town-that-only-exists-in-monster-movies world of the original, features almost the exact same characters and situations, and takes place in a time where the '60s have clearly yet to happen.



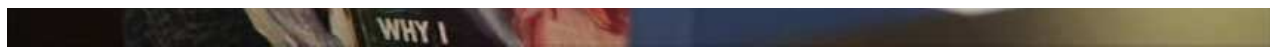


It's an interesting idea, and certainly one that stands as a strong counterpoint to the SyFy Channel-esque creature features whose tone exists in a limbo that's neither realistic enough to take seriously nor tongue-in-cheek enough to treat comically. **GILA** does its best to replicate the '50s sci-fi tone without winking to the camera – Wynorski isn't trying to create a Larry Blamire-like play on the genre, he's just having a good time recreating the format with stock characters playing into their archetypes without going overboard into satire, vintage music that must have cost a good percentage of the meager budget and cars in the film that are clearly from collectors, as they're way too clean, and none of them, notably, get damaged.

The plot structure is essentially the same as the 1959 film. A giant gila monster takes out residents of a small town, starting with a pair of teenagers making out in a car. Teen mechanic Chase Winstead (Brian Gross) and his best girl Lisa (Madeline Voges) get involved, as do the sheriff (Terence Knox), his deputy (**NIGHT OF THE COMET**'s Kelli Maroney), local bad boy Waco Bob (Jesse Janzen), his bosomy girlfriend Carla (Christina DeRose) and a crazy old coot with an arsenal he's stockpiled in order to beat the commies.

A few townsfolk get eaten by the creature, and a local sock hop featuring surf guitar band MG and the Gas City Three leads to the giant critter's last stand. The supporting cast also includes the town mayor (Gerard Pauwels) who hates the dang kids and their hot rodding, his lush of a wife (Julie McCullough, no stranger to the format with roles in **SHARKNADO** and the 1988 **BLOB**), a foreign exchange student and a scientist who gives a half-assed explanation played by Don Sullivan, the original **GIANT GILA MONSTER**'s Chase Winstead himself!





There's not anything particularly shocking about any of the twists and turns the film takes – you can pretty much tell whether or not a character will live within five seconds of their first appearance – but **GILA** isn't made to subvert the genre as much as celebrate it without modern snark. We even get the original's "Mushroom Song" sung at the end, without the slighting wink of "Look at how goofy this all is." It's certainly much more chaste than the output Wynorski is known for, as one character exclaims "Son of a B" and there's nary a boob to be seen, no matter how much DeRose's girls threaten to pop out of their constricting home.

The biggest change from the original has nothing to do with the plot itself, but rather the creature that guides it. While the original **GILA MONSTER**'s critter wouldn't have passed muster in a Bert I. Gordon film, Wynorski's remake features a critter created by Charles Chiodo, of the Chiodo Brothers team that brought life to the **KILLER KLOWNS FROM OUTER SPACE**. A well-conceived monster with decent-looking movement, the CGI in the film looks better than many SyFy Channel features, and Tony (HELLBOUND: HELLRAISER II) Randel's editing doesn't shy away from it, allowing for the maximum number of monster-bound set pieces. Is it convincing? Not really, and the explosions that cause a fair share of destruction aren't either, but it's just convincing enough to be a fitting homage to the original film, and it fits it quite well with the tone established by the performers.



A genre director making a creature feature that has stock characters, unconvincing CGI and formulaic twists is exactly **what I railed about** in my look at Mark L. Lester's **POSEIDON REX**, and it would certainly be easy to dismiss **GILA** for similar reasons. But where **POSEIDON REX** felt like a cheap money grab, **GILA** feels like a film made with a love for the monster movie genre, a kind-hearted and genuinely pleasant attempt to recreate a work the filmmakers actually enjoyed.

While it overstays its welcome at over fifteen minutes longer than the original film and doesn't aspire to be any more than lightweight entertainment with a particularly limited audience in mind, **GILA** is still a heartfelt and likeable little tribute that should make for a fond evening for vintage monster movie buffs. The DVDs extras are mostly text-based (I would have loved to have had a commentary track with Wynorski and Chiodo), but a trailer for **THE GIANT GILA**

nave had a commentary track with WYNORSKI and SULLIVAN), but trailers for **THE GIANT GILA MONSTER** and **GILA** are included, the latter of which must have blended quite well during the film's drive-in release last year.

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