

ONE MILLION B.C.

Directed by Hal Roach, Hal Roach, Jr.
(1940) VCI Entertainment Blu-ray / DVD

One Million B.C. had a 25-year run as the foremost purveyor of "dinosaur" footage to the world's film industries. Countless people who never saw the original film were exposed to stock footage, notably of the "wrestling lizards," right up until black-and-white cinema became obsolete. One of the last movies to draw heavily on *One Million B.C.* was the Mexican *La isla de los dinosaurios* (1966), in which Armando Silvestre and Alma Delia Fuentes were made up and costumed to

resemble Victor Mature and Carole Landis, the better to utilize a large chunk of footage from the Hal Roach original.

On its own, *One Million B.C.* was relatively accessible to see, if anyone cared, often in its truncated 1952 re-release form. VCI has now released a complete, remastered version which looks considerably better than older prints. There are two almost imperceptible split-second glitches but overall the video and audio presentation is quite acceptable, even on a large-screen television.

Surprisingly, the dramatic story of *One Million B.C.* still works today. Larger themes are explored, characters have arcs, civilized norms are upheld, hope for the future is expressed. After a modern-day prologue (omitted from many re-release prints), the picture introduces protagonist Tumak (Victor Mature). He's a member of the brutish Rock Tribe (in fact he's the only clean-shaven adult male member, which clearly singles him out as being different, more "civilized"), led by his father, bearded bully Ahkoba. Women and children of the tribe are abused and forced to subsist on scraps left over after the men have eaten; the Rockers have domesticated dogs but haven't yet figured out that putting a point on the end of their hunting sticks would improve the weapon's effectiveness; leadership of the tribe devolves on the strongest, most assertive male member, and so on. After arguing with Ahkoba, Tumak is tossed off a cliff, chased by an irate mammoth, falls off another cliff into a river, and drifts downstream to paradise

Or as close as it comes to paradise in 1,000,000 B.C., the jungle home of the Shell Tribe and the lovely Loana (Carole Landis). The Shellies are a convivial socialist commune, respecting all and caring for the weak, eschewing hunting (despite having spears with actual flint points), subsisting on fish and vegetables. Their leader is a wise old man (who created the cave images that allow the archeologist in the modern-day sequence to follow the story), a benign intellectual who contrasts strongly with the Rock tribe's selfish, domineering boss Ahkoba. Tumak learns how to share, to protect women and children, and to help others. He falls in love with Loana, but selfishly gets them both tossed out of the tribe (whose tolerance has its limits, it seems). They trek back to the Rock tribe's land and Tumak helps civilize his kith and kin. It all winds up with a spectacular volcanic eruption and a combined Rock-Shell battle against a giant iguana before a happy ending.

One Million B.C. is hardly scientifically accurate, combining dinosaurs with cave people, woolly mammoths, musk oxen, a giant coati, and a modern bear cub, snake and dogs. Although the results are obvious and appear somewhat crude today, the decision to use photographically-enlarged (and cosmetically modified, in some cases) reptiles as "dinosaurs" is reasonably accomplished for the time period—some scenes are especially ambitious, utilizing split-screen mattes rather than back projection—and certainly cheaper than stop-motion animation would have been. Modern audiences may have less tolerance for the on-screen violence wreaked on the hapless "dinosaurs," several of which seem to have been actually harmed during filming.

The single example of a "maninasuitasaurus" is risible, a clunky, human-sized T-Rex that appears twice; director Hal Roach (who, according to the audio commentary, liked the costume prototype so much that he decided to use it rather than wait for a final version to be made) wisely shot and cut these scenes to minimize the awkwardness.

The combination of practical effects (elephants disguised as mammoths, a pig dressed up like a Triceratops) and optical effects (back-projected lizards, matte paintings, composite shots) works well. The two most memorable and effective non-dinosaur scenes are Tumak's plunge into the river after a mammoth knocks over the tree he's in and the volcanic eruption, particularly the shot in which a cave woman is swallowed up by a tidal wave of lava.

Production values are satisfactory, with a good mix of actual locations and studio sets. The Shell tribe's jungle home is an obvious studio-shot "exterior," but this is not aesthetically offensive, and the actual locations (in Nevada and California) are effectively prehistoric-looking.

After the contemporary prologue, there is no dialogue as such: the Rock and Shell people speak briefly but 90% of their dialogue is just proper names ("Tumak!" "Loana!") and no essential information is conveyed verbally. The performers therefore have to convey their emotions and attitudes with facial expressions, gestures, and body language, and this is accomplished in a satisfactory manner, without too much mugging. Victor Mature and Carole Landis get most the attention, but Lon Chaney Jr. as Ahkoba—who changes from a cruel tribal chief to a craven old man after being gored by an ox—has some flashy scenes, and John Hubbard is also good as Ohtao, Loana's Shell tribe would-be boyfriend.

In addition to the film itself, there are two extras. First, a 6-minute slide show of stills, posters, lobby cards and other marketing materials from *One Million B.C.*, including numerous foreign and re-release items and even boxes for the 8mm condensed versions sold to home movie buffs. It would have been nice if these were annotated or even arranged in some thematic manner, but this slideshow is still reasonably comprehensive and quite interesting to see.

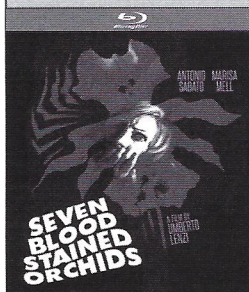
The other extra is an audio commentary by Toby Roan, an advertising copywriter and creative director as well as a film historian. Roan's commentary is very well-researched and he delivers it effectively, although he occasionally tosses in a flippant comment which seems a bit at odds with the otherwise rather strait-laced tone. However, a significant amount of information about the film, the cast and crew is delivered and the commentary never lags or falters.

An upgrade to previous versions, with decent extras to add value.

David Wilt

SEVEN BLOOD STAINED ORCHIDS

Directed by Umberto Lenzi
(1972) Code Red Blu-ray



In many respects, Umberto Lenzi's *Seven Blood Stained Orchids* is the quintessential giallo thriller. Black-gloved, knife-wielding killer? Check. Difficult-to-solve mystery? Present. Graphic murder scenes? Got 'em. Gratuitous nudity? You betcha. Groovy musical soundtrack? On board. This collection of trademark elements helps make *Seven Blood*

Stained Orchids an exemplary giallo—the dictionary definition of the idiom brought to life. It does not, however, elevate the movie to the upper echelon of the genre.

While *Orchids* has no glaring flaws, it never finds the extra gear the best gialli reach. It lacks the dizzying, surreal, blood-soaked artistry achieved by Dario Argento's films of the early 1970s, or by Masiamio Dallamano's *What Have You Done to Solange?*, Lucio Fulci's *Lizard in a Woman's Skin*, and Mario Bava's seminal *Blood and Black Lace*, to name a few other top-shelf selections. Graded like a term paper, *Orchids* would earn a solid B. It's not a masterpiece, but it there's plenty here to keep its audience happy.

The mystery surrounds a series of brutal murders committed by "the Half-Moon Maniac," a killer so named because he leaves crescent-shaped medallions on the bodies of his (usually) nubile young female victims. After narrowly escaping death, Giulia (Uschi Glas) agrees to assist the police with their investigation by laying low and pretending the attempt on her life succeeded. But the murders continue and the detectives make little progress, so Giulia and her husband Mario (Antonio Sabato) decide to investigate on their own. They soon discover that all the victims were guests at a resort where Giulia worked a few summers ago, and that the crimes are somehow related to a fatal car crash. This knowledge leads them to a decadent Roman artists' colony, where a mysterious figure secretly follows them.

Based on a story by Cornell Woolrich, *Orchids* has a solid mystery foundation, but Lenzi and screenwriter Roberto Gianviti stick a bit too close to the source—it's wild and racy for a vintage noir novelette but relatively tame by giallo standards. This may have been intentional, since the film was promoted (misleadingly) as an Edgar Wallace "krimi" in Germany. The German crime thrillers that comprised the "krimi" cycle were comparatively more straightforward and less violent than Italy's gialli, and seldom contained nudity.

There's no mind-blowing, show-stopping centerpiece here for Lenzi and company to hang their collective hat on, but the show is persuasively presented and performed, and consistently holds the viewer's interest. It's well-paced, handsomely photographed (by Angelo Lotti), and features a cool jazz-rock score (from Riz Ortolani). Leading man Sabato, who appeared in dozens of Eurocrime flicks and spaghetti Westerns, is serviceable but hardly dynamic. Or maybe he's simply outshined by German actress Glas, who practically leaps off the screen as Giulia. The rest of cast perform capably.

Code Red offers the film in a fresh hi-def (1080p) transfer from a clean, sharp-looking source with richly saturated colors. Both the Italian and English audio tracks are present, in clear, uncompressed mono with optional English subs. Bonus material includes an amiable, enthusiastic audio commentary by giallo historian Troy Howarth, a previously unseen interview with Lenzi (which runs 24 minutes), as well interviews with Lenzi (7:30 minutes) and actress Gabriella Giorgelli (three minutes), ported over from an earlier DVD release. The package also features the picture's original trailer and an image gallery.

Mark Clark