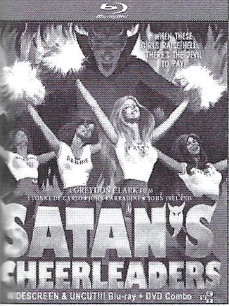


SATAN'S CHEERLEADERS

Directed by Greydon Clark
(1977) VCI Entertainment Blu-ray / DVD

When an automobile accident leaves them stranded on a deserted mountain road, naive high school PE teacher Ms. Johnson (Jacquelin Cole) and her four student cheerleaders are abducted by the school's disgruntled janitor Billy (Jack Kruschen), a peeping Tom and practicing Satanist. When their captor is mysteriously struck dead in the middle of an attempted rape, the nubile quintet seeks the assistance of local sheriff B.L. Bubba (John Ireland) and his wife Emmy (Yvonne De Carlo), who, in a coincidence worthy of *The Virgin Spring*, happen to be the high priest and priestess of Billy's coven. While Bubba is excited at the prospect of currying the Dark Lord's favor with a virgin sacrifice, Emmy begins to suspect that one of the young girls, Patti (Kerry Sherman), harbors supernatural powers of her own.



The third film directed and co-written by actor Greydon Clark, known to cult film buffs for his portrayal of the drug-addled sociopath "Acid" in Al Adamson's *Satan's Sadists*, *Cheerleaders* was conceived as a comedy/horror hybrid that could capitalize on the cheerleader and demonic possession film subgenres popular at the time. Shot over the course of 10 days with a budget of \$75,000, a third of which was earmarked for the film's more established actors (including John Carradine as a homeless vagrant), *Cheerleaders* is the archetypical shoestring production made quickly and cheaply with absolutely no margin for error. According to Clark, the actors were regularly informed that there would be no second takes, and that coverage was either limited or entirely absent. Interior scenes were kept at a minimum to avoid the time and expense of artificial lighting, and the roadside location shots were obtained without permits. The demands of the brief shooting schedule prevented Clark from reviewing any of the dailies, forcing him to rely on his production manager to judge the quality of the footage filmed. It's thus something of a miracle that the film is as good as it is, which, unfortunately, is still not very good at all.

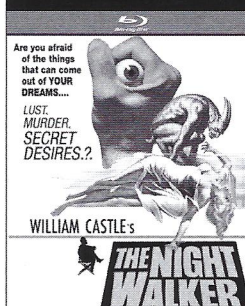
As a comedy, *Cheerleaders* is relentlessly unfunny, especially during its overlong first act focusing on the campus high jinks of the four girls and the three young men who seem to constitute the school's entire football team. The girls' dialogue consists almost entirely of weak double entendres about "scoring" punctuated with good natured derision for Ms. Johnson's inability to understand same. Cole's "I don't get it" shtick wears thin quickly, vaulting over the line that separates naivety from actual brain damage. Things improve somewhat with the arrival of Sydney Chaplin (Charlie's son) as a defrocked monk who delivers the only genuinely funny line in the film while making good use of Ireland as his straight man, but this proves far too little way too late. The rather anemic horror content generates neither fear nor tension, and is repeatedly undermined by actress Sherry Marks' inability to maintain a straight face as she is menaced by the rural warlocks. The film's final twist hints at a genuinely clever plot development, but its execution is so muddled that it ultimately proves more confusing than satisfying. Worst of all, *Cheerleaders* is ruinously tame for an exploitation film built on such a potentially lurid premise. While Clark's previous film, *Black Shampoo*, unspooled like a veritable conga line of sleaze and sadism, *Cheerleaders* is entirely devoid of sex and almost entirely devoid of bloodletting and nudity, barely earning its "R" rating through a brief flash of Sherman's breasts and the script's low-rent *Playboy's Party Jokes* dialog. Although he never says so directly, Clark's informative director's commentary more than suggests that he may have been the victim of a mid-production bait-and-switch that sabotaged the film's planned exploitation content. When commenting on the obligatory shower scene, Clark notes that although all actresses were informed prior to audition that their parts required nudity, three of them raised objections on the day of shooting. He goes on to say that they eventually relented once assured that they would be filmed on a closed set, yet all three are then revealed to have been filmed only from the shoulders up.

Cheerleaders is not a total loss, as the experienced actors all deliver professional and surprisingly committed performances, likely due to Clark's gratitude for their presence and sincere commitment to the project which, after all, he had mortgaged his home to finance. The film benefits greatly from acclaimed cinematographer Dean Cundy's (*Back to the Future*, *Apollo 13*, etc.) camerawork, and Cundy continued to work with Clark even after making a name for himself with John Carpenter's *Halloween*. The very best thing about the film, however, is Kerry Sherman's performance as Patti, the cheerleader who eventually turns the tables on the Satanists. Somewhat resembling a more willowy Christine Lindberg, Sherman radiates complete confidence in front of the camera whether clothed or nude, and announces herself as a legitimate screen presence from her very first appearance. Despite the weakness of the material, she is equally convincing as the bubbly cheerleader and the menacing herald of Satan, and Clark's commentary notes that both Ireland and De Carlo made a point of praising the quality of her performance. It's a shame that her future work consisted almost entirely of television appearances, as she easily could have been the next Claudia Jennings (or perhaps much more, given the right material).

VCI's Blu-ray presentation offers two versions of the film, presumably to highlight the restoration performed from the original negative. The disc features a director's commentary in which Clark offers something of a crash course on microbudget filmmaking and makes his genuine affection for the film well known. The second commentary track consists of an informal chat between director David DeCoteau and genre historian David Del Valle, both of whom give the impression of (half) watching the film for the first time. Basically a breezy medley of genre trivia and personal anecdotes, the commentary perfectly captures what it would be like to discuss the film around the hotel bar at one of the major horror conventions.

THE NIGHT WALKER

Directed by William Castle
(1964) Scream Factory Blu-ray



The great "gimmick" thrillers of ultimate showman William Castle peaked in 1961 with *Homicidal* (the producer's first unabashed attempt to cash in on Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* hyped the "Coward's Corner") and *Mr. Sardonicus* (the "Punishment Poll"). Following that successful double-header, Castle's fortunes slipped with a series of off-the-beaten-path (for him, anyway) experiments, including the

Disney-esque *Zotz!* (1962), the internationally-flavored spy thriller *13 Frightened Girls*, and an ambitious attempt to remake *The Old Dark House* in conjunction with Hammer Films (both 1963), none of which made waves at the box office. Unsurprisingly, Castle chose to re-assert himself by revisiting Hitchcock territory; but this time *Psycho* scribe Robert Bloch himself would provide the lurid screenplays for two consecutive 1964 shockers which would forego any audience-participation devices, save for the desired screams. The well-received *Strait-Jacket* was cut from the expected cloth and also gave us Joan Crawford at her batty best; but the follow-up more or less slipped through the cracks. And that's a shame as it's actually one of Castle's best films as a director.

The fortunes of Irene Trent (Barbara Stanwyck in her last feature film before her nearly equally illustrious television career) take a dramatic turn when her wealthy industrialist husband Howard (Hayden Rorke) abruptly perishes in an explosion in "the lab" conveniently located upstairs in his mansion. Irene should be happy to inherit both the family fortune and newfound freedom from under Howard's oppressive thumb . . . but as her dreams (?) inform her, the blind and burnt spectre of Howard would like to see her remarried immediately. Who can help? Perhaps Howard's attorney (top-billed Robert Taylor, co-starring with Stanwyck for the first time since the couple's divorce) . . . the one man Irene thinks she can trust?

Nobody gets any bonus points for anticipating a preposterously contrived resolution to this narrative; but the elements nevertheless converged in the film's favor throughout. There's the ominous dream lecture prologue narrated by Paul Frees, filled with surreal and demonic imagery (which was immediately used to justify the promise of supernatural content in the film's poster art and ad campaign); there's the truly nightmarish "wedding" scene in a chapel populated by creepy mannequins (as effective a scene of horror as Castle ever personally staged); there's a terrific score by Vic Mizzy (the first feature work of the beloved *The Addams Family* composer inspired professional respect and envy from the likes of Bernard Herrmann himself!) and of course there's Barbara Stanwyck herself, who would have been more than prepared to stand shoulder to shoulder with the greatest (literal) scream queens of all time had *The Big Valley* not come a-calling. Perhaps it's all a dog and pony show, but what a show all the same . . . while poor word of mouth (primarily from young viewers who felt "cheated" by the plot twists) sank the film on release, *The Night Walker* has endured for a reason.

To that end, Scream Factory serves up the pristine black-and-white film with a thoroughly-researched audio commentary track by historian Steve Haberman, who tells you everything you need to know about the film and its participants (sometimes sharing more about their personal lives and politics than one might want to know). The only drawback being that during Haberman's frequent long pauses, the feature itself remains effectively muted. The theatrical trailer, two radio spots and a stills gallery round out the package.

John-Paul Checketti

Shane M. Dallmann