



WEB OF THE SPIDER

Directed by Antonio Margheriti
(1971) Garagehouse Pictures Blu-ray

In 1964 Antonio Margheriti gave us *Castle of Blood*, one of the finest gothic ghost stories in all of cinema. A perfect ghost-train ride of a movie, *Castle of Blood* is dripping in atmosphere and cobwebs, with a heart-breaking performance from the luminous Barbara Steele at its dead heart. Shot quickly after its original director Sergio Corbucci pulled out, the film is everything that one could want in an Italian chiller. Margheriti clearly felt a fondness for the film too, as just a few years later in 1971 he decided to take the same script and shoot it again, only this time in color, and with a different title.

Web of the Spider opens with Klaus Kinski's Poe clawing his way through cobwebs as he relates one of his tales of despair. After a lengthy, wordless sequence in a crypt, his ripe prose kicks in and we discover that he is actually telling his story to Lords and fellow drinkers in an English tavern. Kinski, in another of his "I'll give you two days" cameos, bookends the film as Edgar Allan Poe. Given that the film was a co-production with Germany, Kinski presumably came with the money and overacts in the way that only he could. He rolls his eyes as he attempts to convey the existential dread at the heart of Poe's horrors. He has attracted the attention of Alan Foster (Anthony Franciosa), an American journalist, who for reasons unexplained has followed Poe across the ocean, no mean feat in those days, for an interview. Surely a visit to Baltimore would have been far more straightforward. One of Poe's drinking buddies here happens to be Lord Blackwood (Enrico Osterman), who owns a haunted castle that seems to kill people with alarming regularity, yet he continues to challenge, or invite, people to stay the night. One would assume that after a while, as the bodies mount, the castle would be either boarded up or just demolished, but instead, every year Lord Blackwood leads some hapless fool to their doom. And thus the scene is set, as Alan Foster accepts a £10 wager, and heads into the cobweb-strewn castle for a night he will never forget.

Foster soon discovers that far from being deserted, the castle is teeming with life, or rather, the afterlife. Those who have died through violent means rise up once a year to take the blood of another victim, therefore prolonging their existence in this hellish state. Elizabeth Blackwood (French actress Michèle Mercier, who years earlier had appeared in Bava's *Black Sabbath*) falls in love with Foster, a relationship that could prove vital when the other spirits seem determined to make sure he never leaves. There are some genuinely creepy moments in the film, such as a breathing desiccated corpse in the castle crypt, yet there are still long segments where nothing really happens. Margheriti should have taken the time to bulk out the script with more substance second time around, but this is sadly not the case.

As mentioned, Foster has gone from being English in *Castle of Blood* to being American here, despite the relative pointlessness of the change. Presumably Anthony Franciosa was available, and it was assumed this might aid American distribution. Other changes include the deliberate switch of hair color between the two main women, so Elisabeth Blackwood, originally played by Barbara Steele, is now blonde, and Julia (Karin Field) is now a raven-haired lesbian temptress. An additional subplot was added involving a relationship between the duplicitous Julia and the jealous gardener, but that scene was cut out of the US version and is available here both as a deleted scene and in the Italian cut, which also has one or two other small differences.

Where *Castle of Blood* has gorgeous, timeless black and white photography, *Web of the Spider* has the look of a 1970s episode of *Columbo*, with a mostly brown palette (a consequence of the cheap film stock) and a Jess Franco-influenced over reliance on the zoom lens. The camera is restless in this film, constantly panning and zooming around the set looking for anything interesting. This new HD transfer is excellent—*Web of the Spider* has never looked this good. The photography may be a little brown, but Margheriti's gothic visual sense still shines through. The performances are unfortunately mostly flat and forgettable, and Alan Foster is wearing an oddly contemporary (for 1971) costume which, along with his hairstyle, clashes enormously with the more traditional Victorian dress of the remaining cast. The women are gorgeous and perform well in what are fairly thinly-written roles, which serves to highlight what a great job Barbara Steele performed in the earlier film.

It's not very often that a director will remake his own film (*The Ten Commandments* being one notable example) and given that this was still a relatively busy period for Margheriti (he worked on ten films between 1968 and 1972), one has to wonder what his motivation was for this project. He either had a fondness for the original, or perhaps felt that the original had inadequacies he was hoping to address here. Although Margheriti is often unfairly considered a poor man's Mario Bava, visually this film looks a lot like *Hatchet For the Honeymoon*, which is also mostly shades of brown, released a year earlier. It was also around this time that Bava returned to the gothic, *Baron Blood* echoing of his earlier work in the genre.

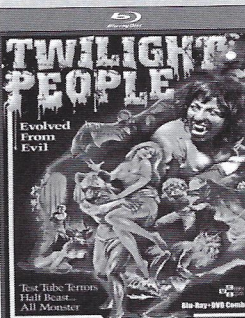
The main draw here is that alongside the HD restoration of the US cut is the complete uncut Italian version of the film, running much longer than the English-language version. Sadly the best source available appears to be from a VHS tape, but for Margheriti completists this is an essential addition to the collection. There are also some deleted scenes featuring extra nudity which do not appear in either print, and German super-8 versions of the film. Alongside the two versions of the film is an excellent compilation of original 35mm trailers for Margheriti films, complete with scratches and audible crackles. *Web of the Spider* is also served by two excellent commentary tracks, including one by DVD Drive-In's George Weis.

Garagehouse Pictures have released the definitive Blu-ray of what is ultimately a fairly minor entry in Margheriti's career. Whilst *Web of the Spider* does not match up to the gothic highs of *Castle of Blood* or even *The Long Hair of Death*, it is still an interesting and entertaining film which deserves to be seen in as high-quality a version as possible. Given how many of Margheriti's films are yet to receive a decent release on disc, this is something to be celebrated.

Adrian Smith

THE TWILIGHT PEOPLE

Directed by Eddie Romero
(1972) VCI Entertainment Blu-ray/DVD combo



Shot in the Philippines, *The Twilight People* can be best described as a poor man's version of H.G. Wells' *The Island of Dr. Moreau*. Loner Matt Farrell (John Ashley) is scuba diving at sea, when he is attacked by two thugs and taken aboard a ship. Farrell awakes from an unconscious state and notices he is strapped to a bed. He is greeted by an adversary named Steinman (Jan Merlin) and an attractive scientist, Neva (Pat Woodell). Farrell learns that he was targeted by Dr. Gordon (Charles Macaulay), who lives nearby on a remote island. Once at the destination, the evil doctor gives Farrell the Cliffs Notes version of why he was captured. Basically, the young man is a suitable mental and physical candidate for an experiment that will change Farrell into a super being—a new species that can survive whatever nature can throw in his way.

Neva, Dr. Gordon's daughter, is in charge of prepping Farrell for his tests. When she gives her subject a close-up eye exam, our hunky hero plants a kiss on Neva's lips—the catalyst that turns Dr. Gordon's plans upside down. Hesitantly, Neva leaves the room, unsuspecting that Farrell is following her to a secret corridor where her father's monstrous man-beast experiments reside in cages.

We get our first view of the creatures: an antelope man, an ape man, a wolf woman, a vampire bat man, and Ayesa, the panther woman—a wasted non-speaking role for Pam Grier, as she does little more than run around and make strange noises. When Neva opens the cage to give Ayesa a meal, she is almost assaulted until Farrell comes to her rescue.

Later that evening, Neva speaks with her maniacal dad and begs him to end the madness, but her plea falls on deaf ears. She would rather die than continue to be involved in her father's world. When Neva attempts to commit suicide by taking a mass quantity of pills, she is stopped by her guardian Peeping Tom—Matt Farrell. Matt and Neva rescue the creatures from their cages, and the entourage plan to escape off the island before they all become casualties by the hands of Dr. Gordon and Steinman's crew. Do they survive? Do we really care?

John Ashley is certainly no stranger to horror fans. He's been seen in *How to Make a Monster*, *Frankenstein's Daughter*, and *Beast of the Yellow Night*. John also had a successful career with an impressive list of films on his resume such as *The Twilight People*, *Savage Sisters*, *Mad Doctor of Blood Island*, *Beast of Blood*, *Brides of Blood*, and *Black Mama, White Mama*. Many of these pictures were shot in the Philippines, a location at which John truly loved to work, as the location sets were beautiful and production costs were cheap. He also worked with Francis Ford Coppola on *Apocalypse Now*. John's impressive television work as producer included *Petticoat Junction* (probably the main reason Pat Woodell was cast as Neva, since she was a star in the series), *The Beverly Hillbillies*, and the cult favorite *Werewolf*. Sadly, John Ashley died at the age of 62, a victim of a heart attack.

VCI Entertainment's Blu-ray/DVD combo of *The Twilight People* looks about as good as it's going to get. It is certainly an improvement over past DVD/VHS editions issued previously. In general, the picture quality is crisp, but there is the occasional glitch or color fade-out that lasts for several seconds on the screen. Otherwise, the mono audio mix is fine, and the few visual hiccups do not distract much from the presentation.

Extras include an informative audio commentary track by film historians David Del Valle and David DeCoteau, a vintage hour long interview with director Eddie Romero, and beautifully restored theatrical trailers and TV spots.

Darryl Mayeski