



## SUPERSTITION

Directed by James Roberson  
(1982) Scream Factory Blu-ray

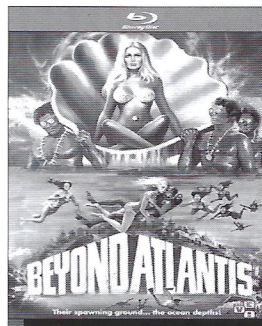
While it managed only a handful of scattered theatrical play dates in major U.S. markets, James Roberson's *Superstition* managed to catch on as an enduring home video favorite Stateside as well as a popular item overseas. While scarcely groundbreaking in plot or concept, the film knew what it wanted to deliver and simply got down to business.

A condemned property owned by the Catholic Church in New England (as played by L.A.) has been a blight on the town (not to mention the site of several unexplained fatalities) for years, but it *does* sit by a large, attractive pond and it's just where the dysfunctional Leahy family wants to set up fresh housekeeping. In the middle of a murder investigation. And just after a kindly priest (Stacy Keach, Sr. was perhaps best known at the time as "Clarence Birdseye" from the frozen food commercials) suffers a fatal refurbishing "accident" involving a rogue table saw blade. This latest incident puts Reverend David Thompson (James Houghton, then both writing and appearing in numerous episodes of *Knot's Landing*) in the unenviable position of looking after the new arrivals. Inspector Sturgess (second-billed Albert Salmi, most recently seen in such high-profile releases as *Caddyshack* and *Dragonslayer* and clearly less than thrilled to be here) has his sights set on a mute red-herring groundskeeper (Josh Cadman) and his elderly mother (Jacqueline Hyde), but Thompson's own investigation into the history of the apparently cursed property reveals it to be exactly that: a vengeful witch was drowned in the pond back in 1692; but not before promising to pulverize anyone who ventured into her territory from then on. Unfortunately for all involved, the good father proves far better at historical research than the actual protection of his charges (he even fails to recognize the abrupt appearance of a little girl in a white dress as a time-honored cinematic warning of danger from beyond even as we acknowledge that director Roberson certainly did his homework).

As boilerplate as Donald G. Thompson's screenplay may seem on paper, however, *Superstition* benefited from a shot in the arm by up and coming executive producers Mario Kassar and Andrew Vajna (then on the verge of striking gold with Sylvester Stallone's *First Blood* franchise, with *Total Recall* and other blockbusters waiting in the wings). Roberson's initial misgivings regarding the reduction of creative control were rewarded with additional assets to accompany a cast of familiar faces. Busy television actor Larry Pennell played the ineffective father figure on his way to ultimate genre recognition in Don Coscarelli's *Bubba Ho-Tep*; while his on-screen wife was Lynn Carlin of the cult classic *Deathdream*. Movie daughters Heidi Bohay and Maylo McCaslin provided plenty of cheesecake appeal (without actual nudity) here before moving on to plenty of television work of their own; and while critics and some fans complained about putting little brother Billy Jacoby on the hit list, one might remember him as the leader of the homicidal moppets of *Bloody Birthday* and consider it justice well-served. But speaking of said "hit list?" *Superstition* truly earns its salt with many an innovative and sadistic burst of practical gore effects (supervised by William Munn) sure to please fans of the "unrated" splatter school. Before we even get to the notorious table saw gag, we've been treated to an exploding head in a microwave oven and the bisection of a victim trying to flee the scene (rough justice for a high-school level prank in the opening scene), with additional grisly fates lying in wait throughout (even the requisite 17th-century flashback sequence features a misadventure involving a wine press). Add a classically-infused score by David Gibney and some impressively-captured imagery courtesy of DP Leon Blank, and the results add up quite satisfactorily.

Unfortunately, once the folks at Carolco hit the *Rambo* jackpot, *Superstition* became a low-priority item and the film was eventually farmed off to Almi Pictures, who only managed a spotty Stateside release several years after its actual production. As *The Witch*, the film gained some traction in Europe, but Roberson and company didn't find out about that until well after the fact as nobody bothered to keep track for them. With the dissolution of Almi and the death of VHS, the film took some considerable time to resurface in the digital age. An Image DVD release, while mostly acceptable, suffered from a slight time-compression issue which distorted the soundtrack somewhat for viewers familiar with it in the first place. The new Scream Factory Blu-ray, which uses a Studio Canal master, seems to have corrected this problem; while the image has been improved. Extras include the theatrical trailer (under the title *The Witch*), as well as two separate and equally pleasant retrospectives. On the first, lead actor Houghton remembers his own star-struck Hollywood childhood and his various forays into film and television, and offers several anecdotes about *Superstition* itself. Director James Roberson (who also settled into a long television career after his dabble in feature filmmaking) supplies all the production and distribution history referred to above. Both men recall that the film they first screened after the wrap was quite different than the finished product as put together by Carolco, but alas, no on-screen moments are specifically ascribed to post-production work. Still, this remains the definitive *Superstition* to date and comes highly recommended.

Shane M. Dallmann



## BEYOND ATLANTIS

Directed by Eddie Romero  
(1973) VCI Blu-ray/DVD combo

When Manila-based pimp and aspiring crime kingpin East Eddie (Sid Haig) learns of a wealth of rare Tuscarora pearls off a remote island in the Pacific, he enlists the aid of longtime accomplice Logan (producer John Ashley), a down on his heels gambling addict, and Vic Mathias (Patrick Wayne), a boat captain and diving expert, in an expedition to wrest these treasures from the depths. After anthropologist Kathy Vernon (Lenore Stevens) overhears their plans, the trio is reluctantly forced to accept her company so that she might prove her theory that the island harbors the descendants of the Minoans, the original occupants of Atlantis. Arriving on the island, they are welcomed with open arms by Nereus (George Nader) and his beautiful blonde daughter Syrene (Leigh Christian), who preside over a tribe that, unlike the two rulers, is marked by a deformity of facial features that make them resemble human-fish hybrids. While the adventurers' suspicions are briefly alleviated when Syrene promises to help them find as many pearls as they wish, as their wealth accumulates and internal divisions fester, the quartet begins to suspect that Nereus and his daughter might harbor strange and sinister intentions.

In his short story "Completist Heaven," acclaimed author and critic Kim Newman tells the story of a film fanatic whose home satellite dish system suddenly stumbles upon a station that broadcasts every Frankenstein film that ever has, or ever *could have* existed. Similarly, the films that former teen idol John Ashley made with Pilipino director Eddie Romero, beginning with 1968's *Brides of Blood*, can best be described as the *Beach Party* series from some alternate universe in which American International Pictures was founded by Michael and Roberta Findlay. Like the Frankie and Annette series, the Ashley/Romero films are also set on gorgeous shorelines and feature romance, musical interludes, and broad humor—but here alternating with nudity, gore, and animal snuff footage. Though in most respects much tamer than its predecessors, *Beyond Atlantis* comfortably fits into this tradition. Clearly modeled after the lost world fantasies that Hammer and Amicus had been producing at the time, *Atlantis* makes the wise decision to stage its fantasy elements within a seedy crime narrative. This sort of genre mash-up had been successfully employed before in *The Astounding She-Monster* (1957), *Beast from Haunted Cave* (1959), and even *Gamera vs. Barugon* (1966), and is particularly effective in compensating for budgetary limitations by making the "real world" protagonists that much more compelling.

Haig steals the movie as an amiable—and entirely credible—sociopath, more ambitious than evil, yet capable of meting out violence when the situation calls for. Ashley delivers the best performance of his career as the type of lovable weasel desperately trying to claw his way out of a mess he himself created, deluding himself as he tries to con others. Wayne is an effective leading man, a mercenary with a conscience who straddles the tough-guy/pretty boy line. Stevens doesn't have much to do in an underwritten part that seems to exist just to fulfill the subgenre's obligation to feature a "good girl" in a halter top.

The fantasy elements, however, are far less effectively executed. There is no clear indication of who the Minoans are, exactly what they want, or why they consider their plan to be the best means for accomplishing their goals. Christian's Syrene is a striking and alluring presence, and her aquatic skills are top-notch, but she is largely reduced to the role of scenery. The actions sequences are threadbare to the point of semi-incoherence, and while the underwater photography and extended swim scenes are at first quite beautiful, they soon become tedious through repetition. These weaknesses are redeemed, however, by a genuinely memorable conclusion that is guaranteed to have viewers chuckling as they eject the disc. Furthermore, a perverse pleasure can be found in the fact that a film which features a pimp protagonist, real-life cockfighting footage, profanity, and a lead actress whose buttocks are given far-more screen time than her face was originally rated GP.

VCI's restored presentation of the film is a pleasure to watch, and features an audio commentary that provides an overview of Romero's career from his time in the director's chair to his infamous gig providing cadavers for *Apocalypse Now*. The disc is also recommended as an essential supplement to the Hemisphere Pictures box sets released by Vinegar Syndrome earlier in the year.

John-Paul Checketti