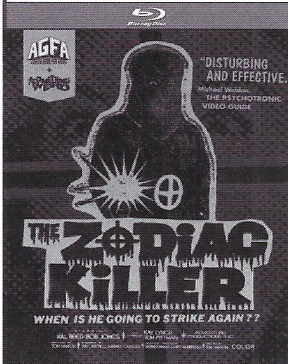


THE ZODIAC KILLER

Directed by Tom Hanson

(1971) AGFA/Something Weird Video Blu-ray/DVD combo



In 1970, California restaurateur Tom Hanson became interested in the hunt for the still-active Zodiac Killer, who murdered a string of victims in the northern part of the state, while bombarding the media and the police with taunting letters and cyphers. The case was a West Coast sensation, with newspapers enlisting the help of the public to solve some of the more complex coded messages. At least one key Zodiac missive was decoded by an amateur cryptography buff sitting at the kitchen table.

Hanson decided to get in on the effort, not by solving puzzles, but by making a movie. It didn't take a criminologist to figure out that the killer was an egomaniac who closely followed his own

coverage in the press. Hanson suspected that if he produced a film about the case and exhibited it in San Francisco, the Zodiac Killer would not be able to resist coming to see it. Observers could then hang out in the lobby, watching for anyone who resembled the police composite sketch. Hanson actually saw this cockamamie scheme through from start to finish and insists that he did identify a likely suspect but was unable to prove anything. The film he made along the way is not half bad, as low budget exploitationers go.

The Zodiac Killer was made with a cast and crew of Hanson's family, friends, and business associates, along with a handful of area actors. It features Hal Reed as Jerry, a quietly warped mailman who is also the Zodiac Killer. The film does a decent job of recounting the real killer's crimes with names and details altered. The picture is a little coy about the identity of the Zodiac at first, focusing for a while on the antics of Grover, a truck-driving hothead who is one of Jerry's buddies. Bob Jones, as Grover, pretty much steals the movie, portraying a proto-Lynchian sociopath whose amusing eccentricities mushroom smoothly into explosive violence. We soon learn, however, that Jerry is the real threat.

Though his performance isn't nearly as memorable as Jones's, Hal Reed is reasonably convincing as a serial killer. It helps that the script, by Ray Cantrell and Manny Cardoza, puts a lot of effort into making Jerry a subtle, nuanced psychopath. It's easy to see why most of his friends and co-workers think he's a pretty normal guy. It's also easier to take the story seriously, since Hanson chose to avoid too much exploitation excess. There is little skin on display and the gore level is realistic and unindulgent.

The Zodiac Killer has plenty of shortcomings, in all the ways you'd probably expect. But anyone considering watching this film at all is probably prepared to overlook some of those. The film does provide a gritty, engaging psycho-killer narrative with several outside-the-box surprises and plenty of disturbing moments. Those interested in the actual Zodiac case should probably check out the film for its early depiction of the events only months after some of them occurred.

The Zodiac Killer is one of the bounty of gems resurrected by the late, great Mike Vraney of Something Weird Video. Something Weird released the film on DVD several years back as part of a Sharpshooter Triple Feature, along with *The Sex Killer* and *Zero in and Scream*, two even rougher psycho-killer pictures. That release still seems to be available on the secondary market, but those interested in this film specifically should head straight for the new Blu-ray released by Something Weird and the Austin, Texas non-profit American Genre Film Archive.

A successful Kickstarter campaign helped the AGFA produce a cleaned-up 4k scan of the film's only known original print. The results are pretty impressive, rendering the blown-up 16mm image with a nice balance of grain and clarity. The print is mostly undamaged, suffering from the occasional burst of speckles or reel change mark. The DTS-HD Master Audio 2.0 soundtrack is more than adequate, particularly since so many scenes take place in real locations, including crowded bars and restaurants. Dialogue is generally clear and the film's musical score sounds reasonably robust.

The package also includes a bonus feature, *Another Son of Sam* (1977). This is a 67-minute Charlotte, North Carolina-lensed psycho killer picture whose plot has zero connection with the actual Son of Sam case and which may simply have been retitled to cash in on the killer's notoriety. If you like *The Zodiac Killer*, you may like *Another Son of Sam*. It certainly doesn't wear out its welcome. The picture's locations and cast of accented local actors will probably be of interest to fans of regional horror films. AGF even provides the bonus feature in a nice, new 2K scan from a 35-mm print.

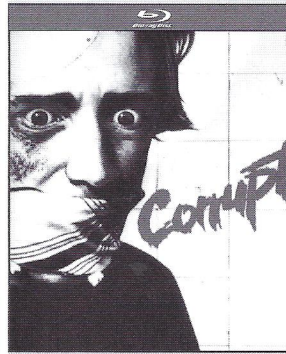
The other major extra is a commentary track on the main feature with Tom Hanson, producer Manny Nedwick, some Hanson family members, and some AGFA staffers. The track is invaluable and really needs to be heard to put the film in complete perspective. Hanson and Nedwick also appear in a short interview featurette. The package also includes some trailers from other psycho-killer films and liner notes from *Temple of Schlock's* Chris Poggiali.

Chris Herzog

CORRUPT

Directed by Roberto Faenza

(1983) Code Red Blu-ray



Here's an intense little item that never found its audience despite plenty of cult potential from cast and creators alike. One of many Italian thrillers shot in New York in the late 70s and early 80s, *Corrupt* delivers neither gory shocks nor crowd-pleasing police action but has a surprising tendency to linger on those who view it all the same.

Harvey Keitel (roughly ten years away from his explosive, career-redefining turns in *Reservoir Dogs* and *Bad Lieutenant*) is comfortably cast as . . . a bad lieutenant. As police officer Fred O'Connor, he shares a beat "on the take" with his partner Bob Carvo (Leonard Mann of such Italian mini-

epics as *The Humanoid* and Ruggero Deodato's *Cut and Run*). The two have rented a secret luxury apartment with their ill-gotten gravy, but as our story commences, Bob is already having second thoughts about his choices and is leaning on Fred to buy him out of the deal. Meanwhile, someone is targeting the members of the NYPD seemingly at random with a series of slasher murders. Is it merely a coincidence when the obviously disturbed Leo Smith (John Lydon, formerly known as "Johnny Rotten" of the seminal punk band The Sex Pistols, in his first and only film appearance) makes a point of letting Fred know that he's been stalking him; ostensibly for a little blackmail? It seems far too easy for the brutal Fred to get the best of the scrawny squealer—and he doesn't believe for a second that Leo could actually be the mysterious cop killer, despite his sudden and desperate confession. But even with Leo helplessly trussed up in a bathtub and completely at Fred's mercy, the lieutenant realizes he can't simply kill his would-be-tormentor. What trail might Leo have left to lead Internal Affairs straight to his door? What reward might Fred be able to extort from Leo's wealthy mother (long-time silver screen veteran Sylvia Sydney was currently enjoying a long string of television appearances)? Oh, and what might the newly and frustratingly upright Bob say if he just happened to stumble in on the situation? Fred takes advantage of the unexpected and allows himself to believe he's solved all of his dilemmas simultaneously; but as any fan of psychological thrillers can tell you, things aren't that simple. Leo is soon right back in Fred's life (and his apartment) but he now has the run of the place for reasons that ought not to be revealed here. And Bob's wife Lenore (Nicole Garcia of *Beau Pere*) also finds herself unwittingly drawn in as the noose tightens . . .

Name cast and metropolitan setting notwithstanding, *Corrupt* was virtually unseen in America outside of its VHS release on Thorn-EMI. Featuring a close-up of Lydon's terrified, gagged countenance and the title in shock-front on the cover, the film was automatically placed in the "horror" section of every video store that carried it; but the folks who rented *Deep Red* and *Dawn of the Dead* (for example) from the same label had little patience for it. The obscurity then slipped into the U.S. public domain, and many a cheapo video label sent it out as *Cop Killers* or (no surprise here) *Corrupt Lieutenant*. However, the PD version was a censored TV print (which even showed up on the Impact on-demand service when they advertised it as an R-rated feature film). Code Red/Diabolik's exclusive Blu-ray release essentially represents the first proper opportunity for American viewers to appreciate *Corrupt* as intended via a restored print bearing the film's original title, *Order of Death*. Said title sprang from the Hugh Fleetwood novel on which the film was based, but if it sounds familiar when associated with John Lydon, it's no coincidence. Lydon himself was set to score the feature, but the producers eventually went with the justifiably ubiquitous Ennio Morricone. Lydon subsequently converted his film music to date into a Public Image, Ltd. album and landed a hit with "The Order of Death" (the relentless mantra of "this is what you want, this is what you get" was later revived as the theme song to *Hardware*). Fleetwood adapted his own novel, but the screenplay was then re-worked by Ennio De Concini and director Roberto Faenza. The latter remains mostly unknown on these shores, but the former's extensive screenwriting credits include such respected Euro-shock titles as Mario Bava's *Black Sunday* itself. *Corrupt* remains a difficult title to recommend as it's impossible to root for anyone save the potential victims of the equally reprehensible lead characters; but Lydon acquits himself remarkably as an actor opposite the veteran Keitel and their deadly psychological duel will certainly hold one's attention as it plays out. Code Red offers a theatrical trailer and a chat with actor Leonard Mann as extras on their all-region platter.

Shane M. Dallmann