

## THE VAMPIRE'S GHOST (1945)B&W

♯♯♯

D: Lesley Selander. John Abbott, Peggy Stewart, Charles Gordon, Grant Withers, Emmett Vogan, Adele Mara, Martin Wilkins. 59 mins.

You have to give credit to Republic Pictures for setting its sights on Val Lewton's low-key RKO classics (specifically *I Walked with a Zombie*) rather than Monogram's scatter-brained quickies for inspiration with *The Vampire's Ghost*, widely considered the best of that second-tier studio's handful of B horror flicks (see also *Valley of the Zombies*, *Catman of Paris*, et al). While director Selander and scripter Leigh Brackett (who'd adapt Raymond Chandler's novel for the Bogie/Bacall noir *The Big Sleep* the following year) fall well short of hitting Lewton and crew's heights, they provide atmosphere aplenty (cheap sets notwithstanding) and a different breed of monster in weary, existential 400-year-old vampire Webb Fallon (Abbott), a fiend who finds little joy in his own villainy. Currently operating a seedy club in the African port city of Bakunda, where he bilks drunken bilge rats and quaffs the blood of hapless natives, Fallon ultimately draws suspicion from missionary priest Father Gilchrist (Withers) when the local population continues to dwindle (causing a severe labor shortage for white bosses) and young friend Roy Hendrick (Gordon) is transformed into Fallon's very own Renfield. Like many a screen vampire, Fallon seeks to recruit a new eternal flame to brighten his lonely eternal existence, in this case Julie Vance (frequent B-western heroine Stewart), ultimately summoning her to his lair in a scene that copycats the above-cited *I Walked with a Zombie*. The film offers several interesting variations on ever-mutable screen vampire lore: Fallon can move about in daylight but only when wearing sunglasses; he can be momentarily halted by a brandished crucifix but not seriously destabilized; his fleshly reflection doesn't appear in mirrors but his clothes can be seen, *Invisible Man*-style. Abbott is quite effective as the wanly relentless bloodsucker (though it's impossible not to wonder what Bela might have done with the role—surely turned it into a different sort of picture), though Gordon is a bit stiff even before his conversion to vampire minion status, while club hostess Mara and dancer Arlyn Roberts supply a welcome dash of erotic exotica. Olive's Blu-ray reps a vast improvement over *Return of the Ape Man*'s presentation, offering a clear, vivid picture (with the unfortunate if unavoidable side effect of further exposing the cardboard production design) and crisp audio. No extras beyond optional English subtitles accompany Olive's Blu-rays, but the fact that the films are available at last furnishes reason enough for fans to rejoice. ♯

## The Phantom's THAT'S EDSPLORATION!

### ORGY OF THE DEAD (1965)♯♯♯

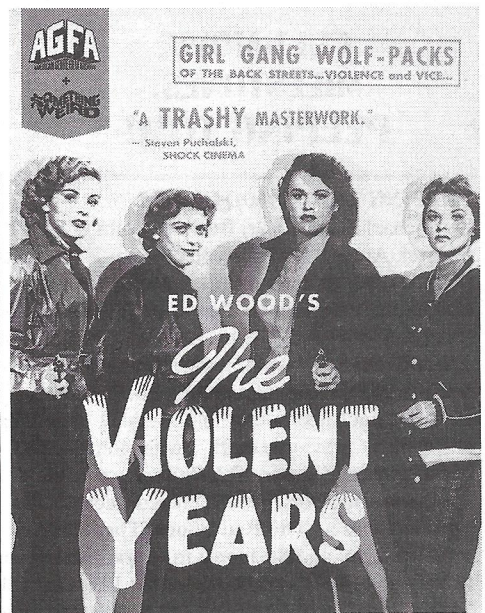
D: A.C. Stephen (Stephen Apostoloff). Criswell, Fawn Silver, Pat Barrington, William Bates. 90 mins. (Vinegar Syndrome, \$32.98 Blu-ray) 9/17

The Ed Wood shocker that dared to ask: "Are You Heterosexual?" at last makes its way to Blu-ray via the dedicated archivists at Vinegar Syndrome. With this R-rated extravaganza lensed in "Astravision and Sexicolor," scripter Ed locates the fine line between Eros and Thanatos and promptly trips over it. As our story opens, hapless writer Bob and squeeze Shirley (Wood-only interpreted by co-producer Bates and actress Barrington, respectively, who would later re-team for 1970's *Agony of Love*) stumble upon a remote cemetery where TV prognosticator/Ed Wood superstar Criswell, as the Master of the Dead, presides over a seemingly eternal "dance of the dead"—i.e., several strip acts performed by an exotic succession of catatonic ecdysiasts. Classic Wood flourishes flower with abandon and abundance here: inspired dialogue (e.g., Bob to Shirley, "Your puritan upbringing may hold you back from my monsters, but it hasn't affected your art of kissing"); constant confusion 'twixt day and night; and static camerawork that harkens back to the celluloid Stone Age. Special kudos go to choreographer Marc Desmond, particularly for his inventive work on Texas Starr's "Cat Dance" (eat your heart out, David Winters). As for the performers, some, like Bunny ("Indian Dance") Glaser and Mickey ("Hawaiian Dance") Jines, are actually quite appealing, sporting shapely, toned terpsichorean forms, defying the top-heavy trend on view in most nudie-cuties of the day. Also on hand are Fawn Silver, delivering an oddly whiny Vampira impersonation as the "Mistress of the Dead," along with a Wolfman, Mummy, and Egyptian "giant." What ultimately saves this candy-colored burly-q of the macabre from drifting into lid-drooping territory, though, is a fun off-the-cuff audio commentary by filmmaker Frank (*Basket Case*, *Frankenhooker*) Henenlotter and Ed Wood biographer Rudolph (*Nightmare of Ecstasy*) Grey (even if Frank seems at times to be rushing the pic's conclusion). Vinegar Syndrome's disc also contains an interview with *Orgy* hoover Nadejda ("Slave Dance") Dobrev and an archival Q&A with *Astro-Zombies* auteur T.V. Mikels, who served as the film's assistant director, plus a still gallery. Withal, a stimulating night at the retro adults-only grindhouse, circa 1965.

### THE VIOLENT YEARS (1956)B&W

♯♯♯1/2

D: William Morgan. Jean Moorehead, Barbara Weeks, Arthur Millan, Timothy Farrell, Glenn Corbett, I. Stanford Jolley. 63 mins. (AGFA/ Something Weird Video, \$34.95 Blu-ray) 11/17



Ed wrote but didn't direct this bizarre tale about a quartet of crazy-for-kicks rich chicks who hold up gas stations, molest stray males (!), and generally ignore society's rules of accepted decorum. The gals, hired by a female fence (fronting for unseen Commie agents) to trash (or at least dishevel) a local high school, end up shooting it out with the fuzz, prompting one mortally wounded femme (Gloria Farr) to observe, "It ain't supposed to be...this way." The thrill-kill frills' philosophy is best summed up, however, by gang leader Paula Parkins' (Moorehead) oft-repeated rhetorical query: "So what?" Judge Jolley's windy climactic lecture, meanwhile, shows off Ed's writing talent as pointedly as anything in the acclaimed auteur's entire oeuvre. Giving the sometimes somnolent proceedings a figurative shot in the arm is the (too-brief) presence of the always-welcome, appropriately dead-voiced Timothy Farrell, the full-time California law enforcer/part-time thesp who enlivened such essential '50s exploitation fare as *Girl Gang*, *Gun Girls*, *Racket Girls* (aka *Pin-Down Girls*), *Dancehall Racket* and *The Devil's Sleep* (the last three as the same character, skid-row crime kingpin Umberto Scali), as a mildly concerned detective assigned to the case. Returning to comment on AGFA/ Something Weird's visually stunning new 4K Blu-ray restoration are Messrs. Henenlotter and Grey, who devote much time speculating re the mechanics of the gang's rape (or "MAN ATTACK" as a subsequent onscreen headline screams) of an unsuspecting victim, apparently resulting in Paula's pregnancy. The celebrity Edheads' expert testimony adds a consistently entertaining, if occasionally digressive, dimension to the experience. Other extras include a restored second feature, Boris (*The Unearthly*) Petroff's *Anatomy of a Psycho* (1961), featuring Ronnie (Adoptive Son of George) Burns, a "gutter-noir" trailer gallery from SWV, a memorabilia scrapbook, and more. Withal, a must addition to any self-respecting sleaze-vid library. ♯