
CAPTAIN

CONTENTS

CAST

Ryland Tews Seafield
Beulah Peters Nedge Pepsi
Erick West Sean Shaughnessy
Daniel Long Dick Flynn
Steve Hoelter Spanish Teacher
Wayne Tews Ashcroft
Lucille Tews Martha
Aylah Hutchison Girly

CREW

Written and Directed by **Ryland Brickson Cole Tews**
Produced by **Ryland Tews, Mike Cheslik**
and **Sebastian Johnson**
Executive Producers **Louis R. Schultz, Cutter Tews,**
Erick West, Beulah Peters, James Stoeffel
and **Chris Hoelter**
Editing and Effects **Mike Cheslik**
Sound Mix **Bobb Barito**
Visual Effects and Cinematographer **Sebastian Johnson**
Creature Suit Design **Joe Castro**

SEEKING THE LAKE MICHIGAN MONSTER

by Barry Forshaw

It's a small but select band – the horror and science fiction movies that not only aim for the lowest common denominator but strive hard to be as achingly bad as they can, and thereby be hilarious (hopefully, at least). If you are a follower of the controversial *Mystery Science Theater 3000* parody series, you might be forgiven for thinking that there is a slew of such films – and certainly the catcalling audience members who are annoyingly superimposed over the ridiculed movies gave the impression that virtually everything in the SF and horror genre was beneath contempt (even such classics, for God's sake, as *This Island Earth* [1955]). But clued-up aficionados take more pleasure in knowingly maladroit movies that use the well-worn tactics of the genre for cuttingly satirical purposes. *Lake Michigan Monster* (2018) may now only be known largely to genre enthusiasts, but its reputation is growing, and for those tuned in to its absurd mindset, a good time is guaranteed.

Made in black-and-white with barely discernible production value, *Lake Michigan Monster*'s creator, the splendidly named Ryland Brickson Cole Tews (known to his friends as 'Ryland Tews'), knows exactly what he's doing with his parody of the 'pursuit of a monster' theme, and lovingly recreates every durable cliché of the genre, putting himself at the center of the adventure as the eccentric bearded captain, Seafield, still dealing with the fact that a grotesque creature consumed his father. Seafield is the ultimate driven hero, and Tews' own performance as the captain is pitched so far over the top that he would make the average end-of-the-pier seaside pantomime look like a Chekhov chamber piece. When viewing Tews' scenery chewing, the vintage films of Tod Slaughter spring to mind as a template.

Nobody, of course, believes the frustrated Seafield's unlikely claims about the death of his father, and he is obliged to put together a crew of oddball specialists in order to hunt down the monster. There is the disgraced sailor Dick Flynn (played by the director's friend Daniel Long), rambunctious weapons expert Sean Shaughnessy (Erick West), and the female component of the crew, the splendidly named Nedge Pepsi (Beulah Peters). While the male members of the team are cut from the same cloth as Seafield – larger-than-life, grimacing figures who relish the absurdity of every line – Tews appears to have decided against the obvious genre cliché choice for his female crew member; he avoids making her the kind of nubile swimsuited beauty that Julia Adams played when hunting creatures from black lagoons. Tews' heroine is a largely asexual sonar specialist, whose playing by Peters is considerably more restrained than that of everyone around her.

While a variety of strategies are lined up to track the murderous creature, plot developments could not be odder – including, for instance, the smashing of an egg produced by the creature which the sailor Dick Flynn may in fact have fertilized. Before events reach their outrageous conclusion, the team has to seek a hidden world somewhat in the idiom of Arthur Conan Doyle – though instead of being in a secluded valley, this one is underneath a lake.

To a non-American viewer, the absurdity of having a monster in somewhere as recognizably unexotic as Michigan may be lost to a great extent – given that to audiences in the UK, Michigan may have something of an allure. But there is no doubting the fact that Tews and his actors are fully aware of the ridiculousness of their quest in this particular setting, and (by all accounts) people who know the locales enjoy a great many pointed references – although it is possible to get the joke without being aware of such things.

Tews of a Kind: Ryland Tews and Larry Blamire

How would Ryland Tews and fellow 'bad movie' director Larry Blamire get on over a glass of wine or two? Both filmmakers have a taste for parody and a love of vintage movies, and their approaches – including the broadest kind of playing – have a lot in common. But were they similarly hands-on in their approaches to their cheap and cheerful films?

Ryland Tews was living in Milwaukee – again, a setting that doesn't have much resonance for those living outside the US – chafing at the unexciting life he was being forced to live. Delivering pizzas was hardly slaking his creative energies, and he nourished a dream of moving to Los Angeles and making movies. But before he acquired fame and fortune, Tews decided to put together a film using the slender resources that were available to him. What capital he had was scraped together from family and friends, and he called upon those friends (such as Daniel Long) to help him out and appear in the movie. He was making, he told them, something that would be a tribute to the 1950s horror films that he loved. Long quickly made it clear that he was no actor, but he was persuaded that this wasn't particularly important. Besides, he was an acrobat, and that might be more useful in the film's stunts than histrionic ability.

The paucity of the budget meant that there was no money for serious sound equipment (and anyone who has seen the film will have discovered the ingenious way in which Tews gets around that problem), and the fact that only four or five people went out on each day's shoot meant that they were required to do everything – no union strictures here about people only doing the job that is on their résumé. The fact that the film got made at all – and that it looks as eye-catching as it does – is a tribute to Tews' tenacity, something he shares with his predecessor Roger Corman, who similarly made films on the slimmest of budgets. It was, in fact, Corman who may be said to have inaugurated the genre of the deliberately maladroit horror film with *The Little Shop of Horrors* (1960). That film was a black comedy: Corman was clearly aware that audiences would not be able to take his micro-budget effects seriously (such as the carnivorous plant that was the star of the film), and so he openly invited the viewer to just enjoy the macabre fun. However, unlike Tews and Larry Blamire, Corman kept things fractionally this side of believability – he did not, for instance, encourage spectacularly semaphored acting, hallmarks of Tews and Blamire.

Larry Blamire was a Massachusetts resident working in underground comics, both writing and drawing. After his stage career, he moved into theater with *Bride of the Mutant's Tomb*, which featured a gauche director in the idiom of Ed Wood, director of *Plan 9 from Outer Space* (1957) and the doyen of bad movie makers, although Wood, unlike Tews and Blamire, was trying to make the best films he could within the confines of his limited talent. Blamire, after various stage ventures, decided to make a micro-budget send-up of the 1950s science fiction films he loved; the result was *The Lost Skeleton of Cadavra*, which was premiered in 2001. The ethos of the film is very similar to that of Tews' *Lake Michigan Monster*, although the parody is not as broad, even though the tagline was 'This was the day the Earth was disemboweled in terror!' And, as in Tews' film, there isn't a single cliché of the genre that Blamire doesn't reference.

Troma Traumas

A different approach to deliberately bad moviemaking was to be found in the products of the exploitation specialists Troma studios, brainchild of Lloyd Kaufman and Michael Herz. Such deliberately crass films as *The Toxic Avenger* (1984) became cult favorites and even upset the British censors – although it's hard to see how the ridiculous bloodshed on offer here with a mop-wielding monster could possibly be taken seriously. The new direction taken by Tews in *Lake Michigan Monster* is pointed up by the fact that the Troma studios peppered their films with a series of deliberately groan-inducing jokes that had little to do with the basic plots of their lunatic bloodbaths – and certainly had no connection with the genre they were supposedly satirizing. Although they offer some slender pleasures, it's not hard to discern that Troma films are not made with any affection for the genre – in contrast to the films of both Tews and Blamire.

Turkeys and Tomatoes

When Harry Medved's book *The Fifty Worst Films of All Time (And How They Got That Way)* appeared in 1978, accompanied by UK television showings of many of the films featured, there was something of a reaction against what was perceived as snobbishness on the part of Medved (together with his co-authors Randy Dreyfuss and Michael Medved). Certainly, many of the films that they took to task undoubtedly merited scorn, but there were some truly strange inclusions – such as Eisenstein's *Ivan the Terrible* (1944/1958) and Resnais' *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961). Bad movies? Really? More egregious, though, was the later denunciation by Medved and his followers of such films as John De Bello's *Attack of the Killer Tomatoes!* (1978). Like most of the films discussed in this article, this was not a bad film by accident – director, writer and players knew exactly what they were doing, and embraced the same kind of send-up approach as Tews. In fact, the film has its enjoyable aspects, although a lot of the joke is simply contained in

the ridiculous title, which tells you all you need to know. (Not a million miles away in terms of quality is William F. Claxton's putatively serious *Night of the Lepus* [1972], where the title conceals the fact that such stars as Janet Leigh are being menaced by gigantic bunny rabbits.) John De Bello's film was, the director noted, a send-up of such films as *Gorgo* (1961) and *Godzilla* (1954), but made with just a quarter of a million dollars. The director made a revealing remark, prefiguring Tews: 'One thing that we did do purposefully to take advantage of the fact that we weren't great was by doing a take-off on bad movies, so if we screwed up, it just added to the cuteness of it. In retrospect, it was pretty ballsy because […] no one sets out to make a bad movie.'

De Bello's last sentence has now, of course, been contradicted many times over. There are clever touches in *Attack of the Killer Tomatoes!*, such as a group of scientists meeting with only the Japanese representative being dubbed – a reference to the woefully dubbed Japanese SF and horror movies routinely received in the United States.

Bad on a Big Budget

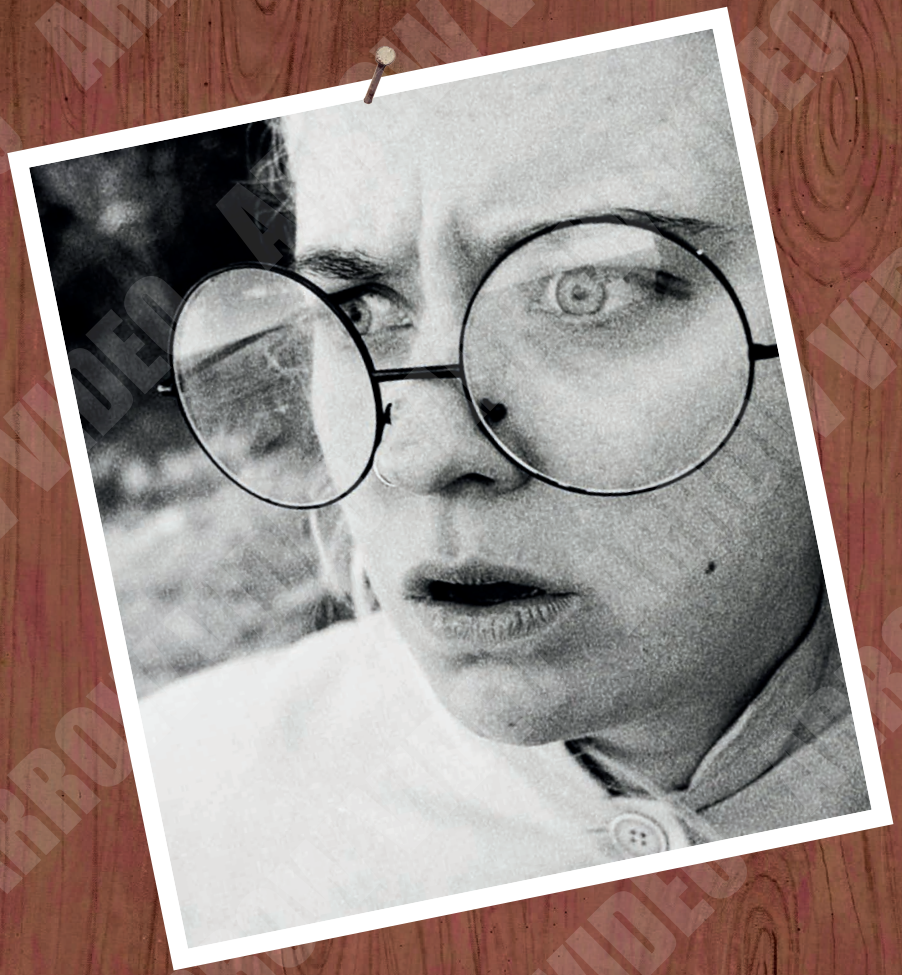
A director who relished such films was the talented Tim Burton, who made his own tribute to bad movies with *Ed Wood* (1994), in which Johnny Depp incarnated the enthusiastic if ham-fisted director. And it fell to Burton to make a film very much in the genre of those discussed above: a parody of the science fiction invasion/monster movie that both relished the gratuitous shocks of the genre and pointed up the ridiculousness at every point – *Mars Attacks!* (1996). When the Ambassador of Mars arrives on Earth and tells the assembled crowd that he comes in peace, it isn't long before bloodletting of a cosmic order is on the agenda. The well-realized monsters demonstrate that Burton had a budget: the Martians have grotesquely exposed brains, as in the Topps bubble-gum cards of the 1960s on which they were based. But despite the conspicuous amount of money spent on the film, the performances by the actors (notably a gurning Jack Nicholson) are very much in the vein of the actors in the epics described earlier. And the fact that the Martians' brains are exploded by the caterwauling country & western singing of Slim Whitman shows that the film is a well-upholstered cousin of the low-budget bad movies.


CAPTAIN

Future Follies

The science fiction/horror boom of the 1950s encompassed a wide range of quality, from classics including the films directed by Jack Arnold and Don Siegel to dismal efforts such as Ray Kellogg's *The Giant Gila Monster* (1959). But it wasn't until the Adam West TV *Batman* era – when camp was enthusiastically embraced – that the audience for the 'bad' end of the spectrum moved beyond a select few. And although it's hard to see a film like *Lake Michigan Monster* making a great impression on those who have no interest in the SF and horror genres, for those fully acquainted with all the clichés, there is fun to be had.

Barry Forshaw's books include *British Gothic Cinema*, *Sex and Film* and *Italian Cinema: Arthouse to Exploitation.*



ABOUT THE TRANSFER

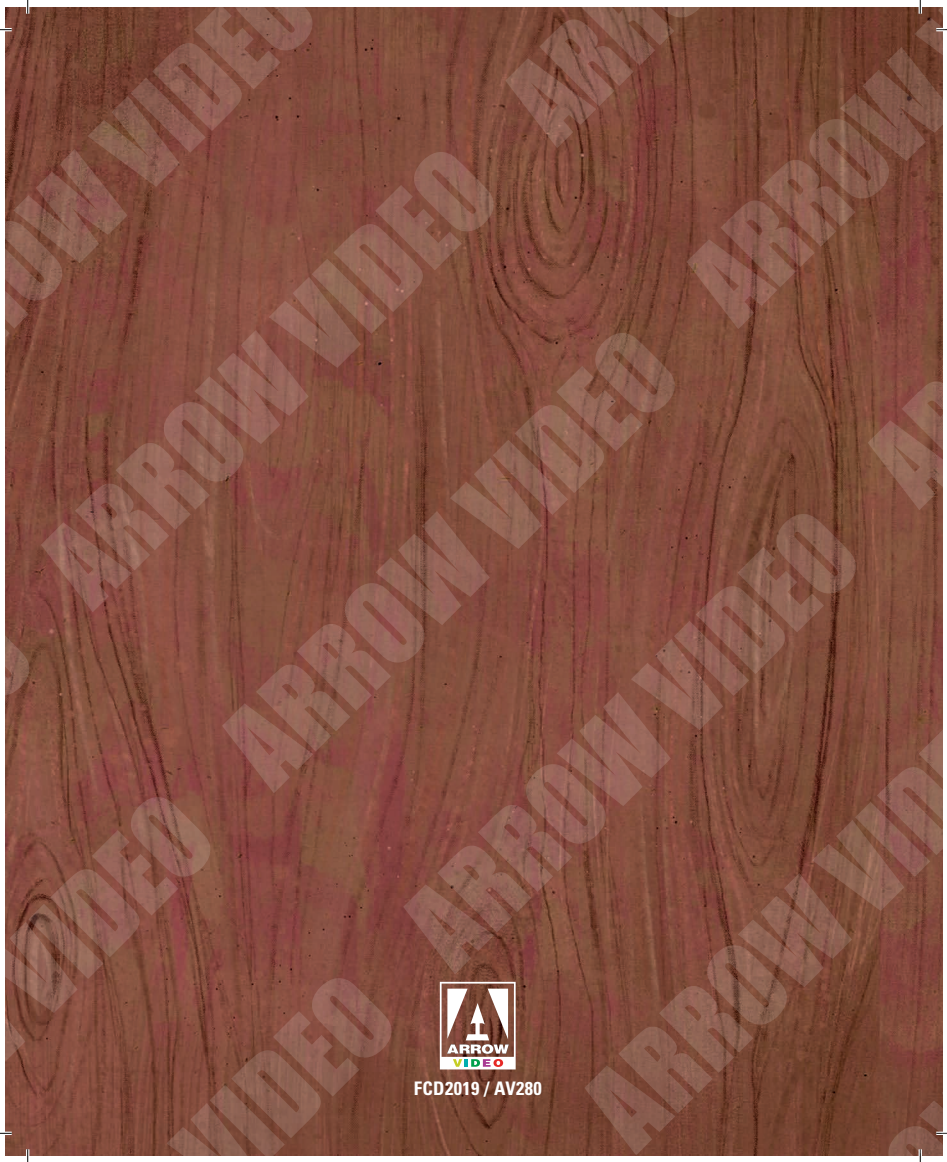
Lake Michigan Monster is presented in its original 1.78:1 aspect ratio with original 5.1 surround and stereo audio. The High Definition master was provided by director Ryland Tews.

PRODUCTION CREDITS

Disc and Booklet Produced by **Michael Mackenzie**
Executive Producers **Kevin Lambert**, **Francesco Simeoni**
Associate Producers **Mike Hewitt**, **Caroline Lichnewsky**
Technical Producer **James White**
Disc Production Manager **Nora Mehenni**
QC **Alan Simmons**
Production Assistant **Samuel Thiery**
Blu-ray Mastering and Subtitling **The Engine House Media Services**
Design **Obviously Creative**
Artwork by **Colin Murdoch** and **Jade Watring**

SPECIAL THANKS

Alex Agran, Mike Cheslik, Mitch Davis, Barry Forshaw, Alexandra Heller-Nicholas, Eric Lavoie, Tania Morissette, Ryland Brickson Cole Tews, Emma Westwood



FCD2019 / AV280