

SCARED STIFF



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CAST

Andrew Stevens as David Young

Mary Page Keller as Kate Christopher

David Ramsey as George Masterson

Josh Segal as Jason

Bill Hindman as Dr. Ben Brightman (as William M. Hindman)

Jackie Davis as Detective Whitcomb (as Jackie Davis)

Nicole Fortier as Elizabeth Masterson

CREW

Directed by **Richard Friedman**

Produced by **Daniel F. Bacaner**

Original screenplay by **Mark Frost, Daniel F. Bacaner**

and **Richard Friedman**

Director of Photography **Yuri Denysenko**

Edited by **Nick Gerard Stagliano**

Score Produced and Composed by **The Barber Brothers**



WOMAN ON THE VERGE OF A NERVOUS BREAKDOWN

by James Oliver

Titles are important. They're usually, after all, our first contact with a film, and something that gives us a flavour of what we might expect.

Scared Stiff, released in 1987 and directed by Richard Friedman, was not the first feature film so called. That same year, a Hong Kong film called *Siu sang mung ging wan* (directed by Lau Kar-wing) was re-named *Scared Stiff* for English speakers. There had been earlier – and, it must be stressed, entirely unconnected – efforts with the same title in 1945 (Frank McDonald) and, most famously, 1953 (George Marshall), a vehicle for Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis. (In the interests of strictest accuracy, let the records also show that there had also been an earlier pornographic film called *Scared Stiff* [1984]. The wonder is that no enterprising smut peddler had thought to use that title before...)

All of the previous versions were comedies, or at the very least comedy thrillers, which should make us wonder why the producers of 1987's *Scared Stiff* – the one included in this package and the only one that will be mentioned hereafter – chose it for their own opus, for this is emphatically not a comedy.

This is not to say that crueller viewers will find nothing to snigger at here; as with all low-budget horror movies, there were production limitations. It cost \$1.3 million, by no means small change when it was filmed in 1986, but not quite equivalent to Friedman's vision. Whether or not they were state of the art in the 80s, the digital effects used to generate the computerised mask that briefly terrorises our main characters will look decidedly primitive to modern viewers. And while the practical effects hold up better, that's only by comparison: the rubbery masks used in the film's final stretch are a long way from the work that make-up acers like Rick Baker or Rob Bottin were doing at the same time.

But films should never be judged by production value alone, and *Scared Stiff* excellently exemplifies this, for beneath the latex and unconvincing digital graphics this is a film that



is rich in interesting ideas and which addresses challenging themes with surprisingly little compromise.

This was Friedman's very first feature film, after an apprenticeship in television. Arrow Video have previously released one of his other films, a cult slasher called *Doom Asylum* (1988); it's notable, apart from the inventive use of autopsy tools as murder weapons, for being the first film of Kristen Davis, who would go on to appear in *Sex and the City* (1998-2004). *Scared Stiff* confirms that Friedman had quite the eye for up-and-coming talent. Although she's second in the cast list, Mary Page Keller (who plays Kate, the troubled main character) would have an enduring career in TV shows like *Pretty Little Liars* (2010-2017) and *JAG* (1995-2005). Although she'd previously done some television, this was her first feature.

Perhaps more important to the film, though, was another not-quite newbie. Writer Mark Frost was another TV alumnus who made the leap to features here. He later returned to the small screen for the work he remains best known for, a project that he began a couple of years after *Scared Stiff*, as co-creator – with David Lynch – of *Twin Peaks*. Frost oversaw both the original series (1989-91) and came back for *Twin Peaks: The Return* (2017).

He was but a struggling writer when he penned the script for what became *Scared Stiff*. His original draft attracted the attention of producer Daniel F. Bacaner, who liked it enough to steer it into production. Given his later work, it's tempting to suggest that Frost is responsible for all that is good in *Scared Stiff*: after all, even admirers of *Doom Asylum* would concede its attractions are less sophisticated than those which draw people, for good or ill, to *Twin Peaks*.

That might be unfair, though: the script was re-written by both Bacaner and Friedman, and their changes were sufficient to earn them screen credit, something that the Writers Guild of America is reluctant to grant to directors and producers without good reason.

Whoever was responsible, though, *Scared Stiff* has a more serious grounding than most low-budget exploitation films, not least in its treatment of Voodoo. Now, Voodoo is not unfamiliar to horror fans – a bit of jungle drumming, a wax effigy or two and, if we're really lucky, a zombie. But *Scared Stiff* acknowledges something else, something rather rare in horror films – namely that Voodoo was connected to slavery. It's generally taken that Voodoo is a fusion of West African religion and the Christianity – and especially Catholicism – that was imposed upon slaves by those who imprisoned them. In films, this is for the most part either disposed of in a bit of dialogue or ignored altogether.

Not here, though: a direct line is drawn from its roots in Africa to its development and use in the Americas by those who were stolen from their homeland. What's more, it's a rare depiction of Voodoo powers being used positively, or at least with good reason: no one, surely, will begrudge the Voodoo practitioners using their powers against George Masterson, a brute who considers them his property and boasts of 'breaking' them. If anyone deserves to be hexed, it's him.

(Interestingly, Mark Frost had another film on release in the same year, one with a not dissimilar theme: *The Believers* [1987] starred Martin Sheen as a New York psychologist uncovering a cult practising a bastardised form of Santería, a cousin to Voodoo. 1987 was a good year for Voodoo and its fellow folk religions; besides *The Believers* and *Scared Stiff*, wannabe witch doctors could stick their pins into *Angel Heart* and – of course – *Zombie Nightmare*. *Scared Stiff*, though, offers the most extensive consideration of Voodoo's connections to slavery.)

Let's not take this too far: no-one's going to mistake *Scared Stiff* for a forward-thinking depiction of the travails of the African diaspora; not when the main character is a white, contemporary pop performer with no personal connection to the slaves. Indeed, the most prominent role for an African American is that old stand-by, the sagacious policeman (Detective Whitcomb, played by Jackie Davis), and he meets an unfortunate end. Even in those brief moments when the slaves exact their punishment, their ceremony is cross cut with one going on at the same time in Côte d'Ivoire, something that might have been drawn from a 30s Tarzan movie, all pounding drums and wild dancing. Not, it is safe to say, an accurate depiction of West African culture.

Still, even if the execution is clumsy, the intention counts for something. It's a film well aware of America's shameful past: look also at the lamp that Jason, Kate's son, is so attached to – the one modelled after one of the indigenous peoples of the Americas. If we didn't catch the resemblance, the point is made further by the name he gives it: Cochise, after the famed Apache warrior who fought the US cavalry so furiously in the territorial wars of the 1860s. It's another reminder of the more regrettable aspects of America's heritage.

Scared Stiff isn't interested in the past and its legacy alone, though. Kate is trying to cope with the present, to raise her son and cement her relationship with David, the doctor who met her under difficult conditions. The film never specifies exactly what those conditions were, but we can infer it involved some sort of breakdown and a period of internment in the Kramaden Psychiatric Institute, the establishment where he is employed.



As Kate becomes more persuaded that strange forces are at work, so David becomes more convinced she's relapsing. What's so interesting here is that his behaviour becomes ever more like that of what we've seen of George Masterson; both men are controlling bullies. David doesn't use his fists, but he's not slow to reach for his medicine bag, administering dangerously high doses. He has forfeited any sympathy we might have had for him by the time he is possessed by the spirit of George Masterson; indeed, he makes the ideal host.

At the very end – after we've seen Kate dispatch George/David – we see Jason, evidently recovered from his ordeal, visiting his mother. She's back in Kramaden again. Now she is catatonic; whether this is due to shock or powerful psychotropic drugs is unspecified. As he leaves, Jason passes a doctor named George Masterson III, who appears exactly like the wicked old slave-owner from so long ago. Is he a descendant (by way of some hitherto-unmentioned child)? Or was Kate less successful in disposing of the evil than we might have hoped?

Another explanation is also possible: that Doctor Masterson has no connection to Kate's demonic nemesis except as his inspiration. There exists the very real possibility that all we have seen has been the product of an unsound mind, drawing together strands from around and re-mixing them into a semi-coherent whole. Charlesburg, after all, does not seem to be the sort of cultural hub that an international recording *artiste* might settle for, and the Kramaden Psychiatric Institute is not quite the world-class facility that such a person might go to recover their shattered nerves.

It's very much to *Scared Stiff's* credit that it declines to confirm any of this. There is no reveal of a still-extant Doctor David; no explanation that might puncture our idea of Kate. It may indeed be an epilogue, but the resolution is ambiguous and accordingly uncomfortable. Such omissions are characteristic of the film, which is pared very nearly to the bone. For instance, we're given no indication as to the significance of the pigeons that seem to herald doom. And it might have been expected that we would pay a visit to the local historian that Detective Whitcomb recommends so enthusiastically – someone who could tell Kate (and us) more about the life and times of George Masterson. Its absence adds to the mystery and, indeed, the ambiguity surrounding the happenings.

Although it ends with gore galore – and let's agree that the chap unzipping his head is a nice touch – *Scared Stiff* is mostly a slow-burn affair, certainly more so than most films intended for the home video market (it enjoyed a brief theatrical release in regional territories, but its major market was always going to be on VHS). So, naturally, the distributors did their best to conceal that, hiding it in a gaudy box that emphasised the sensational aspects. And, of course, they saddled it with that title too...

It's too late to give it a different name (although in New Zealand it was known as *The Masterson Curse* – a far better title), but it is very much to be hoped this latest revival allows it to get more attention. Certainly, the concerns of the film – the issues of America's historic injustices towards its non-white populations, its interest in mental health and even the toxic relationship at its heart – are more relevant to our time than they were in the 1980s. Even if it never quite manages to transcend its genre or its low budget, it offers so much more than you'd expect from a film called *Scared Stiff*.

James Oliver is a film critic/historian and filmmaker; he is a regular contributor to Reader's Digest and The New European.



ABOUT THE RESTORATION

Scared Stiff has been exclusively restored by Arrow Films and is presented in its original aspect ratio of 1.85:1 with mono audio. An original 35mm interpositive element was scanned in 2K resolution on a Lasergraphics Director at EFilm, Burbank. The film was graded on Digital Vision's Nucoda Film Master and restored at R3Store Studios in London. The mono mix was remastered from the original mag reels at Deluxe Audio Services.

All materials for this restoration were made available by MGM.

Restoration supervised by James White, Arrow Films.

R3Store Studios: Gerry Gedge, Jo Griffin, Rich Watson, Nathan Leaman-Hill, Emily Kemp

EFilm: David Morales

Deluxe Audio Services: Jordan Perry

PRODUCTION CREDITS

Disc and booklet produced by **Ewan Cant**

Executive Producers **Kevin Lambert, Francesco Simeoni**

Technical Producer **James White**

QC **Nora Mehenni, Alan Simmons**

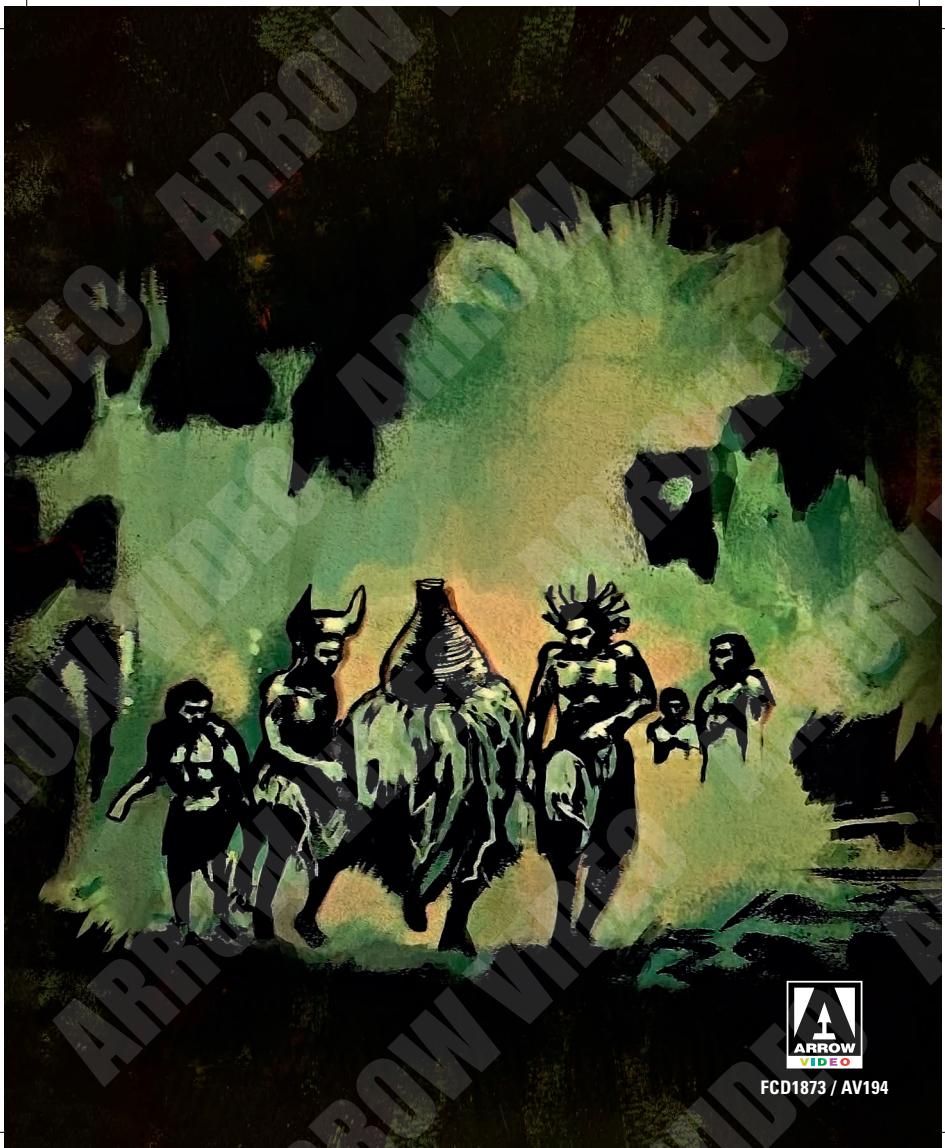
Production Assistant **Nick Mastrini**

Blu-ray Mastering and Subtitling **The Engine House Media Services**

Design **Obviously Creative**

SPECIAL THANKS

Alex Agran, Barry Anderson, Dan Bacaner, Billy Barber, Robert Ehlinger, Michael Felsher, Richard Friedman, Graham Humphreys, Jerry Macaluso, Joshua Segal, Tyler Smith and Andrew Stevens.



FCD1873 / AV194