

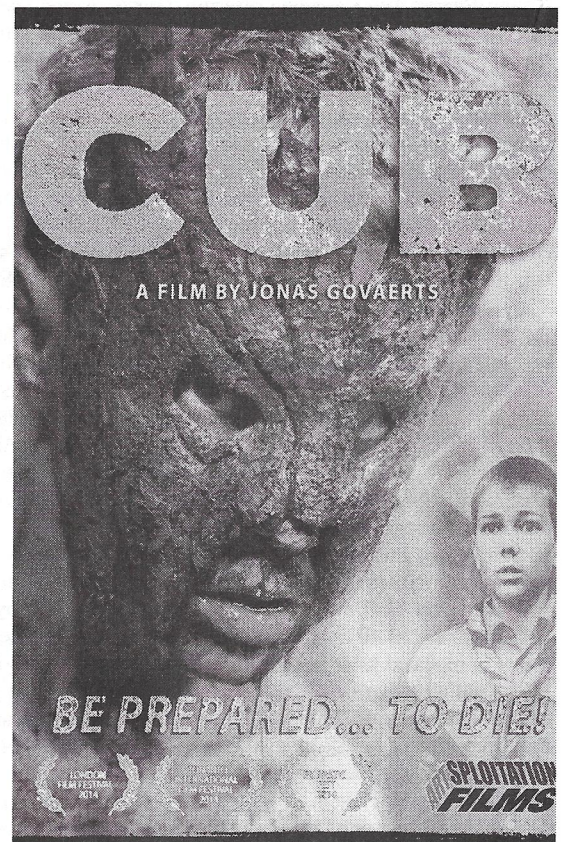
The French art-house horror **Horsehead** (Artsploitation, 7/15) boasts lush cinematography, an eerie tone, and cryptic symbolism, while leaving some of its questions unanswered. Jessica (Lilly-Fleur Pointeaux in an impressive performance) visits her estranged mother's home when Jessica's grandmother dies. The young woman begins having dreams that make her curious about her grandmother's life and her own unknown biological father. Her questions to locals are met with responses that only make matters more puzzling, so she explores the mysteries in both her waking life and through lucid dreaming, her major field of study at university. As Jessica attempts to take control of and guide her dreams, she develops an illness that includes an ever-worsening fever as events in both reality and her unconscious grow more horrific. Director Roamin Bassett creates an opulent dreamscape with a dream-guide wolf, plentiful bloodletting, and the titular creature, which wears a cardinal's outfit. Bassett's marvelous work with colors and light shows a hint of Argento influence but is definitely its own unique style. Catriona MacColl (Lucio Fulci's **Gates of Hell** trilogy) gets a chance to shine in the third act after a somewhat leaden start. Murray Head, of **One Night in Bangkok** fame, does a nice job as Jessica's sympathetic stepfather, Jim. I had some issues with the sound design: at times there are suspenseful moments in absolute silence; at other times, during dream sequences, viewers are pummeled with totally distracting dubstep music.

Two European horror films featuring disturbed and disturbing young boy characters are **Cub** (Artsploitation, 8/15) and **Goodnight Mommy**. Both movies are well acted, ably directed by first-time helmers, and boast impressive cinematography and scores. The films are quite different in their approach and subject matter, though. **Cub** (aka **Welp**) is a Belgian shocker about a group of Scouts and their three adult supervisors whose camping trip is spoiled by a deadly presence. Twelve-year-old Sam (Maurice Luijten) is the outcast of the group and has a troubled past. The Scout leaders try to spook the boys with the local legend of a half-boy/half-werewolf named Kai, and Sam puts more stock in the stories than the other Scouts. The group is forced to go further into the deep woods than originally planned, into an allegedly haunted area with which the leaders are unfamiliar. Sam wanders into the woods alone and discovers a large structure in a tree and then encounters what he thinks is Kai. Naturally, no one believes him, and when acts of violence start happening around the campground, Sam is quickly blamed. Kai seems to strike a bond with Sam, making matters worse for Sam and the others as the violence escalates. Though **Cub** lacks strong character arcs and a detailed backstory about the horrific force in the forest, I wasn't bothered by

those factors because I had such an uncomfortably fun time with all the elaborate death contraptions in the woods and the fact that absolutely all living things are fair game here. **Cub** has a political incorrectness that Hollywood usually won't touch, so don't expect an American remake. Director Jonas Govaerts and co-writer Roel Mondelaers infuse the proceedings with a dark sense of humor; for example, some of the imaginative set-pieces for the deadly traps resemble something that Wile E. Coyote and Rube Goldberg might have cooked up had they formed an alliance for nefarious purposes.

Whereas **Cub** has a manic pace and takes place in the great outdoors, the Austrian chiller **Goodnight Mommy** is a house-bound horror tale that is calculated, deliberately paced, and rather distant and studied. A mother (Susanne Wuest) returns home from the hospital after a car accident, with her face wrapped in bandages. Her young twin sons Elias and Lukas (real-life twins Elias and Lukas Schwarz) are taken aback by what they see as her unusual behavior. Their mother was not this strict, stern and mean before the accident. The boys begin to suspect that this woman must be an impostor. During a family game of "Who Am I?," they give her what to them are obvious clues, but she cannot guess the answer: "Mama." She later tells Lukas, the son whom she clearly favors, that she will not prepare a meal for Elias, and that Lukas is forbidden to talk to his brother. The boys' suspicions are elevated and they devise plans to learn the truth about who this person really is. Both the mother and the sons are creepy. She dishes out discipline from behind her gauze-swathed mask, with only her mouth and bloodshot eyes peeking through, as the twins collect large beetles in an aquarium, fashion arrows out of pencils, and communicate in an ominous, hushed fashion. Writers/directors Veronika Franz and Severin Fiala have crafted a claustrophobic atmosphere with a constantly growing sense of dread. **Goodnight Mommy** is a psychological horror film that delivers some disturbing visuals and an unwavering sense of unease and will likely warrant an instant rewatch with many viewers.

CP: I grew up on Edgar Allan Poe, so I was really excited to see the animated portmanteau **Extraordinary Tales**, directed by Raul Garcia. Loosely intertwined by a frame narrative in which Poe, in the form of a raven, and Lady Death have a conversation, **Tales** is an anthology of five Poe stories, with each boasting its own distinct animation style. The segments, created between 2004 and 2014, feature the voices of Roger Corman, Guillermo del Toro, the late Christopher Lee, and even a recorded narration by the late, great Bela Lugosi (which was supremely effective). Still, the choice of stories was



not the best. **The Fall of the House of Usher**, for instance, doesn't adapt well to a visual retelling; it was decently executed but basically boils down to two characters hanging out in a creepy house. I was a bit bummed out that **The Murders in the Rue Morgue** didn't make the cut, but I imagine that the violence might be a tad too intense for the audience the filmmakers are going for. Also featured are **The Tell-Tale Heart**, **The Pit and the Pendulum**, **The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar**, and **The Masque of the Red Death**. The wraparound seemed a bit unnecessary. All in all, it's a good family movie, with some eerie elements.

In the genre-bending department, **Yakuza Apocalypse**, by legendary gore-loving auteur Takashi (Gozu, **Ichii the Killer**) Miike, offers viewers a live-action anime with a high level of absurdity. What starts as a comedic Yakuza flick spirals into chaos when a kappa goblin resembling a disgusting half-turtle, half-man hybrid, an otaku nerd with supremely good martial-arts moves, and their frog-costumed friend challenge the criminal hierarchy. Then vampirism spreads, the local infected populace all start claiming to be Yakuza for myriad reasons, and fights break out. Forty-five minutes later, a giant, kaiju-sized frog appears and there is more fighting that doesn't go anywhere—then the movie abruptly ends. Rarely would I say a movie has *too* much fighting, but this is one that definitely suffers from that overkill. Yayan Ruhian, who plays the otaku, stands out for his fighting ability and absurd persona, while Hayato Ichihara does a great job of keeping main character Kagayama's melodramatic personality in check amidst the wackiness.