

culpable for allowing the atrocities to continue out of sheer ignorance and denial—denial none too far removed from that of the killer himself. Meanwhile, the surreal and queasily humorous atmosphere is enhanced from beginning to end not only by the near- ceaseless droning of "The Old Rugged Cross" on a church organ but by the narration of crime reporter "Tom Sims" (Leslie "Les" Carlson went on to far greater fan recognition by virtue of his role as the devious Barry Convex in David Cronenberg's *Videodrome*) who not only introduces the story but continues to deliver his deadpan observations on camera, actually interrupting scenes in progress while helping himself to the furniture! While this approach may not have been quite what producer Karr had in mind for the project, it unquestionably helps *Deranged* stand out in a now over-crowded field.

While Kino's near-pristine Blu-ray transfer opens with the roar of the MGM lion and the AIP logo, collectors will be happy to know that it contains the completely uncut version of the film, including a taxidermy sequence (eyeballs and brains scooped out of a human head) that was considered simply too much for an American "R" rating in 1974. Fans who had seen the restored 1993 Moore Video VHS release complained bitterly when MGM subsequently released the cut version on a "Midnite Movies" double-bill DVD with *Motel Hell*, though in all fairness, MGM simply gave the public exactly what they would have seen on the big screen in the 70s (as *Deranged* was never televised, fans had been making do with a bootleg print of the AIP cut since the dawn of the tape-trading era). The quality and completeness of this new release are now inarguably definitive, but Kino goes the extra mile with the supplements, starting with two feature audio commentaries. On the first, filmmaker Elijah Drenner holds court with writer/co-director Ormsby, who graciously supplies the genesis of the project and detailed behind-the-scenes anecdotes (including one in which his gracious Canadian hosts kicked him out of a residence in which he was shooting once they caught on to just what sort of film he was making). In deference to the memory of the late Bob Clark, he declines to go into detail over the falling-out the creative team experienced during the production which led to Ormsby and Gillen being banned from the editing room, though he also reminds us that Gillen (also no longer with us) eventually popped up again as the unforgettably crotchety Santa Claus in Clark's aforementioned *A Christmas Story*. *Video Watchdog*/TCM film historian Richard Harland Smith supplies the second commentary, filled with relevant facts and trivia regarding the history of Ed Gein, *Deranged* and the various personalities involved.

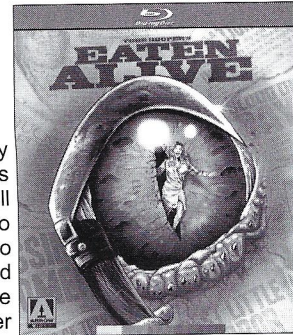
A seemingly last-minute video interview with producer Tom Karr gives us his side of the experience, but the "theatrical trailer" offered here is a latter-day MGM construction sans voiceover narration (you can find the real deal on YouTube or—if you're lucky enough—your copy of *Mad Ron's Prevues From Hell*). Despite this minor misstep, Kino's *Deranged* ranks as one of the most welcome disc releases of the year.

Shane M. Dallmann

## EATEN ALIVE

Directed by Tobe Hooper

(1976) Arrow Films Blu-ray/DVD combo



After *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974), director Tobe Hooper eventually received sufficient high-profile attention to sign on with Universal Pictures. This arrangement would eventually lead to 1981's well-reviewed *The Funhouse*, but well before that, point Hooper was approached by writer/producer Mardi Rustam to helm a script that he and Alvin Fast had concocted as a potential follow-up to Hooper's breakthrough. The script initially titled *Swamp Demons* was deemed unusable by Hooper as it stood, but he allowed that it might become a viable project if his *Saw* colleague Kim Henkel were to give it a rewrite. While Hooper didn't want to stereotype himself by simply trying to recreate *Saw*, he noted the opportunity to branch out with a studio project shot on a soundstage tailored to a new and extremely dark fairy tale vision, and the chance to participate in the casting eventually resulted in a lineup that ended up nearly unmatched in horror history (though some participants had yet to make their most lasting impressions).

However, the road that eventually led to the film best known as *Eaten Alive* (also released in various territories as *Death Trap*, *Starlight Slaughter*, *Horror Hotel* and *Legend of the Bayou*) was sufficiently rocky for Hooper to walk out on the production before its completion. The details of exactly what happened will apparently never be agreed upon exactly by any two witnesses, but it all boiled down to "creative control" issues between Hooper and Rustam which hit the boiling point when Hooper discovered that the majority of the film's Japanese funding stemmed from a guarantee that Hooper would, indeed, direct the film (though nobody bothered to tell that to the man himself). While successful enough as a low-budget grinder, the wildly uneven *Eaten Alive* never received the popularity or respect that *Saw* had achieved—but of course it lingers on thanks to the myriad names involved; not to mention one of the most utterly possessed performances by any screen psychopath. Today, decades after the initial release, Hooper is at peace with a film he once wanted his name removed from, and he's more than happy to endorse its most stunning home video incarnation yet.

Rustam was seeking a follow-up to his successful *Psychic Killer*, which featured the legendary Neville Brand in the cast, and had the idea to cash in on the current *Jaws* craze with a story featuring a murderous crocodile. Hooper and Henkel took the germ of an idea from a Texas "true crime" story to topline Brand as Judd, proprietor of the hideously run-down Starlight Hotel. (which also sells itself as a tourist attraction "zoo" featuring a caged monkey and, of course, a monster croc patrolling the "moat" in the middle of the bayou nowhere). Not at all to Judd's liking is his proximity to the local cathouse and the tendency of clients and "workers" alike to wind up on his doorstep; and Judd first displays his vicious puritanical streak by recognizing Roberta Collins (*The Big Doll House*, *Caged Heat*) as a fleeing prostitute and proceeding to hack her to bits with a scythe before tossing her to his saurian "friend." Judd barely has time to cover his bloody tracks before a family nearly as dysfunctional as Judd himself arrives to check in (lord knows why). Dad (William Finley) is already at the point of insanity before things go wonky at the Starlight, Mom (*Saw* survivor Marilyn Burns) has a diet of pills and booze, and poor little Angie (Kyle Richards, best known as young Lindsey in John Carpenter's *Halloween*) is treated to the sight of a dead monkey just before the croc makes a meal out of her cute little dog. Judd manages to "subdue" the parents in one fashion or another, but the terrified Angie manages to hide under the hotel where Judd can't quite reach her . . . and *that's* when Mel Ferrer (who also managed to appear in the *other* film known as *Eaten Alive* in 1980 for Umberto Lenzi) shows up looking for his missing daughter with her sister (Cristin Sinclair, who co-starred with Collins in *Chained Heat*) in tow. It's going to be one *long* night.

*Eaten Alive* features amazing cast. A mummified Carolyn Jones (Morticia Addams and Marsha, the Queen of Diamonds herself) has a grand old time as "Miss Hattie," Madame of the local brothel. Sheriff Stuart Whitman sees no cause for alarm, which apparently means that the dangerously disturbed Judd only got around to acting on his murderous impulses that very evening. And nobody enjoys poking the bear more than Robert Englund (nearly a decade away from his Freddy Krueger role, the actor was already doing quite well in 1970s major studio Hollywood but snatched up the chance to act in this seemingly unlikely project just to meet and work with legends such as Jones and Whitman). Englund has the film's most memorable line: "My name's Buck . . . and I'm rarin' to . . ." The only major performer who never got to work with Hooper himself was Janus Blythe (misspelled "Blyth" in this case), "Ruby" in Wes Craven's *The Hills Have Eyes* and its misbegotten sequel: the actress was brought in for extra sex appeal by Rustam in scenes shot after Hooper's departure . . . the producer was also quite likely responsible for the gratuitous sequence in which Sinclair disrobes for the camera for no purpose but to quickly get dressed again to investigate some off-camera screams!

But the film belongs to the legitimately terrifying Brand. The second-most-decorated combat soldier of WWII had plenty of personal trauma and a history of alcohol abuse on which to draw as he sank himself into the role of Judd . . . keeping himself company with his constant, insane mutterings; feeding non-stop on mournful country music and going joyously berserk stalking and decimating the cast to the point where the unwieldy prop crocodile becomes a minor threat by comparison. Brand didn't even attempt to ease off the intensity to reassure the six-year-old Richards (in addition to *Halloween*, the junior scream queen also appeared in *Escape to Witch Mountain*, *The Car* and *The Watcher in the Woods* along with her plentiful television work, but she recounts this as the most legitimately terrifying experience of her life, which in turn makes *Eaten Alive* the scariest film she's ever seen). To most viewers, *Eaten Alive* doesn't have the relentless staying power of *Saw*, but one really can't count oneself as a connoisseur of screen dementia unless they've taken in this performance.

"Hit and miss" is a fair summation of the patchwork film. The lack of legitimate thought or back story for the peculiar characters is a liability; the extra Rustam scenes work against Hooper's original vision of a nightmare taking place completely on a single set; and most disappointingly of all, Marilyn Burns follows up her classic Hooper turn by spending the majority of the film gagged and tied to a bed (child endangerment and animal chomping were scarcely an agreeable substitute for audiences drawn by Hooper's previous work, as the vicious comment cards—sampled here amongst the supplements—clearly indicated). But when the film hits, it hits just as hard, and in addition to the fine work of the cast to end all casts, there's the intensely colorful and surreal Starlight soundstage itself to consider; and while "dim and ugly" were typical words used to describe some previous video releases, the Arrow Blu-ray transfer resembles *Suspiria* itself by comparison.

Arrow's supplements are similarly bountiful but consist mostly of material ported over from the earlier Dark Sky DVD release. Exclusive to the Arrow release are new interviews with a subdued Hooper (who also introduces the film: "Hope you like the colors!"), Reardon and a feisty Janus Blythe. *Eaten Alive* may rank as a footnote in genre history, but it's a significant one all the same, horror fans couldn't ask for a more definitive package.

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