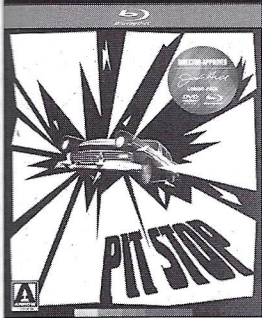


PIT STOP (AKA THE WINNER)
Directed by Jack Hill
(1969) Arrow Films Blu-ray/DVD combo



Praised by Quentin Tarantino as the “greatest living American director,” Jack Hill is undoubtedly one of the most beloved figures in exploitation film history. With titles like *Spider Baby*, *The Big Doll House*, and *Foxy Brown* to his credit, Hill wrote and directed films that were memorable for their novel and entertaining storylines, sharp dialogue, and strong female characters. *Pit Stop*, released by Arrow in a print that employs its

original title *The Winner*, is certainly Hill’s most “adult” film—not in terms of its exploitation elements, but rather in its nuanced performances, arthouse aesthetics, and meticulous subversion of genre clichés.

When street racer Rick Bowman (Richard Davalos), a damaged loner with an aversion to being touched, attracts the attention of ruthless racing sponsor Grant Willard (Brian Donlevy in his final role), he is invited to compete in the “Figure Eight,” an appallingly dangerous combination of stock car racing and demolition derby conducted on an intersecting track. Rick’s adversary in his quest to dominate the sport is Hawk Sidney (Sid Haig), the self-proclaimed “dingiest” driver in Willard’s stable, whose success is largely due to a complete disregard for his own safety. After Rick blossoms under the tutelage of a kindly mentor while romancing a sweet-natured racing groupie, Jolene (Beverly Washburn, from Hill’s *Spider Baby*), he sets his sights on a bigger challenge—unseating professional stock car racer Ed McCloud (George Washburn) to become Willard’s top driver.

For the first two-thirds of the film, *Pit Stop* runs through all of the hoary clichés inherent to the traditional sports film, including the initial string of demoralizing setbacks, the series of training montages that mark the protagonist’s progress, and the climactic “big event” that rewards his tireless effort. But if *Pit Stop* begins as *Rudy* (1993), it soon morphs into *North Dallas Forty* (1979), taking a series of dramatic turns that reveal the screenplay to be a masterwork of audience misdirection. Instead of the expected fable celebrating triumph over adversity, Hill employs the trappings of the archetypal sports narrative to offer a searing indictment not only of sports culture, but of competition in general—here vilified as an exploitive and dehumanizing process that ultimately serves only the interests of the rich and powerful. The film is set within a seedy subculture of desperate losers, modern gladiators in the worst sense of that term, forced to risk mutilation and death for an audience of cretins who revel in the sight of someone else’s blood. The numerous and prolonged scenes of the drivers working on their cars emphasize the symbiotic relationship between the drivers and the wrecks they pilot, as both are merely castaways to be abused, hastily repaired, then sent out to be battered again. Presiding over this grotesque spectacle is Donlevy’s Grant Willard, initially mistaken by Rick as a predatory homosexual looking for rough trade, but later revealed to be a psychological sadist who derives pleasure by physically and emotionally crippling others for his own amusement and financial gain.

It is not especially groundbreaking, however, to assert that the world of professional sports is exploitive and amoral, as even traditional athletic narratives concede that point. What is truly subversive about Hill’s film is the way in which it deftly shatters the widely-held illusion of competition as an inherently ennobling means of salvation for the directionless underdog. Instead, competition is depicted as the moral code of the predator, both reinforcing and glorifying preexisting sociopathic tendencies. In many ways, the film resembles the Mickey Rooney camp classic *The Fireball* (1950), the story of a hot-headed orphan who is first saved then seduced by the glamour of the professional Roller Derby racket. But in *Pit Stop*, cooption is substituted for redemption. As the viewer follows Rick’s journey from determined and self-reliant newcomer to callous opportunist, we are reminded that competition is a toxin, and the number of open wounds one has when immersed in it determines how quickly and thoroughly one will become infected. The competitive mindset dictates that everything—and

everyone—must be reduced to instruments used to achieve one’s own ends, regardless of the consequences. The losers are simply collateral damage, ushered off the field in ambulances while the winner performs his victory lap. The film’s conclusion, though a powerful upending of audience expectation in its own right, also demands that viewers reevaluate all that has come before, as with one look Davalos makes clear that Rick has not been corrupted; he has become exactly what he set out to be.

Pit Stop is to the sports film what *Kiss Me Deadly* is to the detective film—a caustic deconstruction of the viciousness disguised as masculine virtue that comprises both genres’ core values. Just as *Kiss* depicts a universe so mired in nihilistic disarray that the film’s credits roll backwards, *Pit Stop* unfolds in an environment so morally bankrupt that Sid Haig serves as the voice of ethical reason. Hawk, though introduced as Rick’s loud-mouthed foil, is in fact the only character to display remorse or altruism, even in the face of defeat. Haig’s performance—whiplashing from feral exuberance to quiet misery and back—is riveting, perfectly capturing the desperation of a man stuck on the lowest rung of life’s ladder, whose only hope for advancement rests on an ability to perform a useless task exceedingly well. Davalos is quite effective as the rancid Horatio Alger poster boy, his natural charisma making the ending that much more jarring. As is typical for Hill, his female actors are especially good, with Beverly Washburn playing both sexy and sweet, and Ellen Burnstyn adding a believable sense of gravitas in her portrayal of McCloud’s long-suffering wife.

Arrow, which seems to be shaping up to be an edgier Criterion, offers the film in a handsome package featuring a transfer supervised and approved by Hill as well as numerous extras. Unfortunately, the commentary track by Hill and biographer Calum Waddell is a frustrating experience best described as two friends speaking amicably yet entirely at cross-purposes. Part of the blame rests with Waddell, who basically replicates the same interview style that proved less than illuminating in his biography of the director. But, as Sid Haig makes clear in a separate interview featured on the disc, Hill is also a “terrible self-promoter,” unwilling or unable to describe the creative processes he employs, and steadfast in his refusal to assume the mantle of auteur or to discuss any aspect of his films in subtextual terms. Thus, one must be content to let Hill’s films speak for themselves. Fortunately for all, they loudly proclaim his unique talent.

John-Paul Checkett

LOST SOUL: THE DOOMED JOURNEY
OF RICHARD STANLEY’S ISLAND OF DR. MOREAU
Directed by Dick Gregory
(2014) Severin Films Blu-ray / DVD

South African filmmaker Richard Stanley, with two feature films under his belt—*Hardware* (1990) and *Dust Devil* (1992), had labored for several years on a dream project: A faithful adaptation of H. G. Wells’ *The Island of Dr. Moreau*. The Wells novel had been adapted for the screen twice before, with Erle C. Kenton’s *The Island of Lost Souls* in 1933 and Don Taylor’s *The Island of Dr. Moreau* in 1977. While those versions had their respective admirers, Stanley had his own vision on the anti-vivisectionist science-fiction tale. Laboring for several years on production sketches and storyboards, Stanley approached New Line Cinema to produce, at that time an independent production company known for handling edgy, “niche” fare. The production went into preproduction. Stanley set foot in the wilds of Cairns, Queensland, Australia to begin filming . . . when bad weather, among many other things led to Stanley being fired from the project.

With the clock ticking, the producers hired old school Hollywood John Frankenheimer (*Seconds*, *The Manchurian Candidate*) to direct—and had to wrangle the momentous egos of Marlon Brando in the titular role as well as brash upstart Val Kilmer. The usually charitable Los Angeles Times pronounced the resulting 1996 adaptation as “the worst film by a major American director in over seven years.”

Director Dick Gregory’s resulting documentary, *Lost Soul: The Doomed Journey of Richard Stanley’s Island of Dr. Moreau* accomplishes a most remarkable feat. In spite of the various and sundry candidates for the project’s “hero” or “villain,” none is offered. Many aware of the production’s back story will come to the documentary expecting another story of a young visionary squashed by the rich and powerful, *Lost Soul* takes the high road and lets all the interview subjects speak for themselves.

Many stories are recounted about Brando’s legendary misbehavior on the set. His bankability as a star had declined previously, although his presence in any cast certainly lent gravitas in any film he appeared in. One comes away from the documentary thinking that Brando came into the project, knew it was in a shambles, and then used his influence to have a little fun with the project. Brando is certainly the best thing about the film, and his unique costume choices—as well as the choice to cast the 17-inch tall actor Nelson de la Rosa in matching outfits were his alone. The 1996 *Island of Dr. Moreau*’s greatest contribution to pop culture is the reoccurring character on the cartoon TV series, *South Park*, in the person of Dr. Alphonse Mephesto.



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