

DIGITAL DEBUTS

ARROW VIDEO

(\$29.99 Blu-ray) 2/16

PRAY FOR DEATH (1985) ♂♂♂

D: Gordon Hessler. Sho Kosugi, James Booth, Donna Kai Benz, Michael Constantine, Robert Ito, Kane Kosugi, Shane Kosugi. 92 mins.

Sho portrays a Japanese businessman (and closet ninja, natch) who, accompanied by screen wife Benz and real-life sons Kane and Shane, relocates to Houston in search of "success." At first, Sho is hesitant about the move. "American cities are so violent!" he protests. To which wife Donna Kei counters, "You've been watching too many movies" (like this one). Sure enough, faster than you can say "land of the free," Sho and family run afoul of a gang of vicious hoods led by Limehouse, interpreted with sadistic flair by Brit thesp Booth (of *Zulu* fame), who also penned the punchy script. Limehouse and cronies are looking for a priceless necklace they think Sho has discovered in his newly purchased restaurant and will stop at the proverbial nothing to lay their slimy hands on same. They illustrate that contention by killing Sho's wife and snatching son Shane. The cops, as usual, prove incapable of redressing these wrongs, so Sho dons his ninja threads and heads out to "redefine revenge." *Pray for Death* may not be a great advertisement for life in these United States or attain the dizzyingly surreal heights of such earlier Shocases as *Revenge of the Ninja* (VS #96) or *Ninja III: The Domination* (Shout! Factory), but its predictable plot barrels along at a brisk clip, the action scenes (including a kiddie kung-fu set-to between young Kane and some preteen toughs) are excitingly mounted, and Booth makes for a memorably scurvy screen villain. Arrow Video's new Blu-ray edition includes a fresh Sho interview, an archival Q&A with the ninja star during *Pray's* back-in-the-day NYC preem, and a booklet with excerpts from Sho's forthcoming autobiography.

—The Phantom

CRITERION COLLECTION

(\$39.95 Blu-ray) 1/16

THE AMERICAN FRIEND (1977)

♂♂1/2

D: Wim Wenders. Dennis Hopper, Bruno Ganz, Lisa Kreuzer, Gerard Blain, Nicholas Ray, Samuel Fuller. 126 mins.

In the Realm of Ripley, Rene Clement's thrilling 1960 *Purple Noon* (VS #22), starring a charismatic Alain Delon as Patricia Highsmith's sociopathic protag Tom Ripley and adapted from her novel *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, still rules the cinematic roost.

The Ripley role has since been ably handled by Matt Damon in Anthony Minghella's 1999 version *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (VS #36) and creepily interpreted by John Malkovich in Liliانا (*The Night Porter*) Cavani's 2002 *Ripley's Game* (VS #51). (Barry Pepper also had a go at Ripley in 2005's rarely seen *Ripley Under Ground*.) Unfortunately, in Ripley's second screen appearance, Wenders' 1977 *The American Friend* (from Highsmith's *Ripley's Game* novel), an irritatingly out-of-control Hopper effectively tramples the part, playing Ripley as a transplanted western gunfighter crossed with *Easy Rider's* Billy the Kid. Which is too bad: while Hopper goofs on the role and film, talented Swiss thesp Ganz gives his textured all as Zimmerman, the movie's central character, a picture framer/family man gradually (or rapidly—he and we are never quite sure) dying from a rare blood disorder who's given a shot to grab a fistful of francs if he agrees to assassinate a known American mob figure. Ganz lends great nuance to his troubled character, agonizing over his decision once he agrees to undertake the dangerous assignment with Ripley's sometimes dubious help, as does Kreuzer as Zimmerman's puzzled spouse. Wenders succeeds in creating an evocative mood during certain set-pieces, like Zimmerman's peril-fraught train journey contrasting his interior turmoil and violent mission with the beautiful scenery he speeds through, but undercuts the material with too many self-conscious post-modern touches, including the stunt casting of several auteurs in secondary roles. While ex-pat American maverick movie-makers Ray and Fuller are adequate as a forger and gangster, respectively, their appearance tends to distract from the core story. Viewers and critics alike remain sharply divided re Wenders' approach here. While we side more with the naysayers, *The American Friend* is still worth a look for fans of the popular German filmmaker and late author Highsmith, even if she's a bit underserved here. Special features on Criterion's restored Blu-ray edition include a 2002 audio commentary with Wenders and Hopper, new interviews with Wenders and Ganz, deleted scenes with Wenders commentary, trailer, and an essay by critic Francine Prose.

—The Phantom

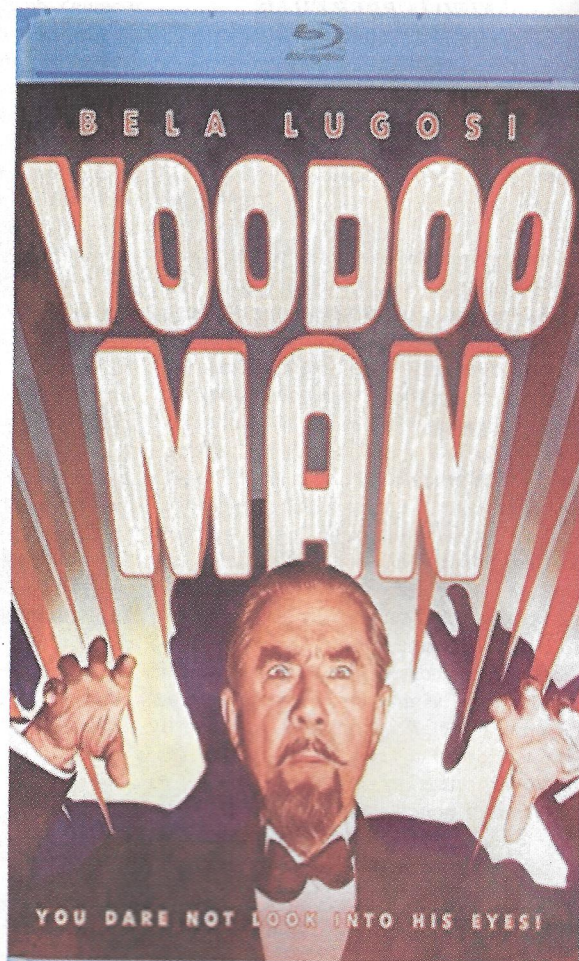
KINO LORBER FILMS

(\$29.95 Blu-ray) 1/16

FIGURES IN A LANDSCAPE (1970) ♂♂♂

D: Joseph Losey. Robert Shaw, Malcolm McDowell. 110 mins.

Samuel Beckett meets Peter (*The Gladiators*, *The War Game*) Watkins by way of *The Pris-*



oner in long-blacklisted ex-pat Losey's bleak yet exciting existential antiwar film—one of many reflecting the senseless chaos of the then-raging Vietnam conflict—adapted by actor/scenarist Shaw from Barry England's novel. Middle-aged macho man MacConnachie (Shaw) and his fellow fugitive, cynical young rookie Ansell (McDowell), traverse a perilous war zone, pursued by a faceless foe, in a bid to reach equally anonymous allies. These armed, aggro variants on *Waiting for Godot's* Vladimir and Estragon pass their time in often fractious philosophical discourse when not dodging dogged helicopters and engaging in sudden, seemingly random fire-fights. Both actors are well up to the task of energizing this intense, kinetic two-hander, with Shaw turning in especially rigorous work, while cinematographers Henri Alekan, Peter Suschitzky and Guy Tabary more than ably convey the harsh vastness of the titular terrain, one embracing both infernal deserts and frigid mountains. While not known as an action director (though his 1963 biker/sci-fi hybrid *These Are the Damned*, available as part of Sony Pictures' essential *Icons of Suspense Collection: Hammer Films* set [VS #75] also moves at a dynamic pace), Losey displays his range here with a Budd Boetticher-like assurance. *Figures* barely played Stateside and pretty much flopped elsewhere, so kudos to Kino for rescuing it from undeserved oblivion.

—The Phantom