

Absolute Horror



The American Horror Project

By Vince D'Amato

Last year, British distributors Arrow Video released an unlikely horror Blu-ray box set titled *The American Horror Project*, adorned with the stamp of a hopeful number "1" on the spine of the sleek boxed packaging. This set, so far the first and only volume, contains three little-known American horror films from the 1970s: *Malatesta's Carnival of Blood*, *The Witch Who Came From the Sea*, and *The Premonition*. Easily the most



of the box set's seemingly weird selections. The style of all three films, while all attractive and alluring in their own rights, are wildly different. *Carnival of Blood* is the lowest-budget-looking of the three, and *The Premonition* is the most straight-forward; the latter is a thriller about a pair of violent (and

recognizable title of this trio of curios is *The Witch Who Came From the Sea*; not only did

Subversive Cinema put out a very nice special edition DVD roughly a decade ago, but the film itself boasts the talents of one just-starting-out director of photography Dean Cundey, who would go on to work with John Carpenter during the heyday of the famous genre director's film career (collaborating on *Halloween*, *The Thing*, and *Escape From New York*) and would then move on to work with Robert Zemeckis (the *Back to the Future* trilogy) and Steven Spielberg (*Jurassic Park*) – on top of this, the leading lady, Millie Perkins, starring as the metaphorical *Witch Who Came from the Sea* in a very unusual role as a sometimes gruff-but-likable woman with severe emotional and psychological issues. Millie Perkins had previously been known for her starring role in *The Diary of Anne Frank*. *The Witch Who Came From the Sea* was also my personal favourite of the three films, being not only strangely erotic and violent, but also weaving in the depths of the psychological issues along with child abuse and a satiric critique on television media and the idealization of physical beauty. It boasts a really well-written script, aided by the overall strange and dreamy feeling blanketing everything within the film. In fact, the scripts are good for all three of the films, which is the basis for the strength



also physiologically disturbed) birth-parents who go after their own daughter's adoptive parents in order to kidnap her back and restart their own family. As straight-forward as this may be, there are still instances of beautiful dream-like violence and horror that do not actually lead us to any discernible plot conclusions; instead these sequences remain vague and give us time to go along with the film. There are other unusual touches to *The Premonition*, but nowhere near the off-the-wall weirdness and curiosity of *Malatesta's Carnival of Blood* – that film is a most gleefully bizarre micro-budget horror film that takes place at a rapidly dilapidating (but at the time, still functioning) roadside amusement park, giving it a skewed feeling of the horror classic *Carnival of Souls* – however, in Leonard Kirtman's one and only

feature film, things go from a little bit strange to the utterly bizarre with wild abandon, and it's all wrapped around the idea of the character of Malatesta, the leader of an immense group of weird ghouls who inhabit the park, and the humans who get trapped in his nightmare world. The equally unusual cinematography of this film sees the characters and scenery continually mis-framed and awkwardly cropped, the film print isn't in the best of conditions, and yet there's a very strange charm about it. After watching all three of the movies in the box set back to back, it's easy to see why Arrow Video had curated these three specifically to lead off what will hopefully be their continuing series of underexposed horror films that helped to shape the landscape of horror cinema within their own decade (in this case, the 1970s). Not only was the landscape created through the gritty and beautiful low-budget style that cinema maverick Tobe Hooper exploded into the pop culture of 1970s horror with his *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, but also with the seemingly ongoing ideas concerning unstable mental health and inward psychological horror. Clearly, after watching all three films in a row, not only is one's palate of 1970s horror more defined (again, kudos to Arrow Video for the curating and restoration of these movies), but that definition becomes clearer as the tunnel to other low-budget 1970s horror movies begins to open more widely because of the experience.

I was lucky enough to have grabbed Arrow's *The American Horror Project* box set from one of the HMV stores in Vancouver that was closing down, after the February announcement that the entire long-running Canadian chain would be permanently shutting its doors in less than three months (from that time). Indeed, I was able to get my hands on the box set two weeks following that announcement, and at 30% off of the sticker

price, which made it about \$55 CAD. I don't know that most people would be able to find *The American Horror Project* at this price, but even the higher asking price is very well worth the discovery of these previously obscure horror movies, as we're now on the cusp of video stores and genre retailers falling into obscurity themselves, as each of these films once had. In the wake of all this, cinephiles and horror fanatics such as myself can appreciate having distributors like Arrow Video who can see the value in rescuing these cinematic horror obscurities from absolute oblivion, and bringing them out in a contextualized light that can reignite our excitement for weird horror movie history. In addition, the special features sections in *The American Horror Project* box set feature extensive and insightful interviews with the filmmakers. Much like George A. Romero's revered *Night of the Living Dead*, all of the films restored for this box set were originally produced by independent businessmen for the film business. The low-budget film business in the 1970s was not so different from today, stories rife with filmmakers who were so exhausted and broke by their first filmmaking experiences that they never lifted a camera again; or the now-cliched story of crooked film distributors who took off with the film and never reported anything back to the independent producers; and even the odd we-had-a-little-success-with-it story.

Apart from bringing to mind some of the other seminal and more-famous low-budget horror films of the 70s decade like Hooper's *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, this box set also serves to remind us of the hugely creative, inspired, and bizarre oddities that also came out of the horror cinema from that decade, films like *Pigs* (recently released by Vinegar Syndrome), Roger Watkin's *Last House on Dead End Street* (sadly out-of-print at the moment), *God Told Me To* (Blue Underground) and George Barry's surrealist one-off *Death Bed: The Bed That Eats* (Cult Epics). I would highly recommend to horror film fans and horror cinema enthusiasts – and fans of the just plain weird – that allowing Arrow's *The American Horror Project* to serve as a launching pad into the world of oddball 70s obscurities would be a exhilarating kick-off into the underground society of the culture of American horror films.

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