

THE  
LATE-NITE  
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FILE: *Hometown Horror*

by Paul Corupe

**D**reams and nightmares have long been an inspiration for horror cinema, but they found their fullest expression in the messy and unfocused regional horror boom of the 1970s. Some of the most original and groundbreaking visions of locally made cinematic terror emerged from this era, including Tobe Hooper's nightmarish *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and George A. Romero's *Night of the Living Dead*. But for every certified classic, thousands more brought their own dark visions to life, often just around the corner from where they lived. It's this D.I.Y.-leaning movement that is the focus of Arrow Video's new *American Horror Project Volume 1*, a Blu-ray set that features '70s indie favourites *Malatesta's Carnival of Blood* (1973), *The Witch Who Came From the Sea* (1976) and *The Premonition* (1976).

These films, and other regional works, are often more remarkable than studio films because their directors were free to take artistic risks, often mixing art and sleaze in equal doses, and relying on dreamy atmosphere to make it all work. It's a distinctive aesthetic perhaps best evidenced in the Philadelphia-shot obscurity *Malatesta's Carnival of Blood*, an offbeat, episodic piece that follows a nightmare crew of vampires, mad scientists and cannibals living in a rundown carnival, where they make meals out of locals unlucky enough to get caught on the grounds after closing time.

Next up, we arrive in Mississippi for *The Premonition*, in which Sheri (Sharon Farrell) is distraught when her adopted daughter is kidnapped by her disturbed biological mother Andrea (Ellen Barber) and a carnival mime (exploitation stalwart Richard Lynch). Sheri has a psychic bond with the young girl and receives telepathic messages in her dreams that she hopes will lead to her daughter's whereabouts.

The set's most accomplished entry, an oedipal thriller punctuated by intense, surreal murders, is Matt Cimber's Malibu-lensed *The Witch Who*



*The Premonition*

*Came From the Sea*. This one tells the story of a girl (Millie Perkins) obsessed with her ship captain father who was lost at sea when she was a child. She's also frightened that her violent sexual fantasies are bleeding into reality after two men she dreamed about torturing turn up dead.

Despite being made across the country, all three of these striking works feature reality-distorting sequences, a technique used successfully in other regional efforts such as *Carnival of Souls*, *Death Bed* and *Let's Scare Jessica to Death* – films that toss aside narrative concerns and focus on building atmosphere and mood. In this tradition, *The Premonition* has Sheri's striking extrasensory visions of Andrea fighting with her boyfriend and covered in blood, *The Witch Who Came From the Sea* sees

each murder sequence presented as a possible dream, with fuzzy focus and altered sounds; and *Malatesta's Carnival of Blood* depicts victims' dreams bleeding into real life and includes some acid trip-styled sequences featuring a churning cannibalistic horde that lurks in the catacombs under the fairgrounds. Not only do these scenes gloss over budgetary and storytelling shortcom-

ings, they also provide a chance for the filmmakers to experiment with the medium.

These films were also uniquely suited to this approach, since their use of otherworldly dreaminess is in stark contrast with their physical locations. Shot in actual bars, graveyards and – in the case of two of the set's films – carnivals, there's an authenticity to regional horror that Hollywood couldn't always replicate. Even if you didn't grow up down the street from where they were made, these works present a convincing alternate version of our own world with familiar (sometimes even recognizable) locations now overrun by zombies, mad killers or cryptozoological monsters.

By putting audiences in a commonplace setting that's slightly warped and distorted – a faintly recognizable locale that no longer feels safe – films such as *Malatesta's Carnival of Blood*, *The Witch Who Came From the Sea* and *The Premonition* use a mix of realism and dreamy atmospherics to achieve what Stephen King once called “the poetry of fear.” And while regional horror works don't always make sense, or exhibit the polished touches of a professional production, they can, like poetry, evoke intangible sensations and feelings that are just as terrifying. 🗿

