

Action in Corfu

The opening scene in the 1990 action feature that is set god knows where but was shot on Corfu, **Hired to Kill**, an Arrow Video Blu-ray & DVD release (UPC# 760137843399, \$40), has the worst close-ups you have ever seen. George Kennedy, playing some sort of powerful moneyman, hires the hero, played by Brian Thompson (who doesn't just have one square jaw, he has two), to help free an elderly political prisoner, played by Jose Ferrer, from the dungeon where the country's leader, played with wonderful flair by Oliver Reed, has dumped him. The country's security is really tight, however, so for Thompson's character to sneak in, he has to use a team of women, and pretend to be a clothing designer organizing a fashion shoot. Anyway, that opening scene, in which the mission is spelled out for the hero, is ineptly staged, and the close ups at its conclusion, meant as punctuation, are an embarrassment, but the rest of the 91-minute film is quite enjoyable. The actresses, like their characters, were hired for their capabilities to perform the stunts and were then gussied up to look like models, rather than the other way around. One has big hair, as befits the era, but the others are more utilitarian in their dos, and display a suitable amount of seriousness about their mission. Although Thompson's character does make one homophobic remark, he does not in any other way overplay the nature of his cover, and to maintain it, he even ends up planting a kiss flat onto Reed's lips, which is the comical highpoint of the film. The rest of the movie is about the emotional dynamics between the various girls, and the attack on the compound where Ferrer's character is held. There's a decent amount of nudity, lots of explosions and other violence, well defined characters, a coherent story with a couple of twists, and Corfu. What more does one need?

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1. Although the cinematography is not always elaborately lit, the color transfer looks decent, with bright hues and accurate fleshtones. The generally centered 5.1-channel Dolby Digital sound is somewhat garish and best kept at a modest volume. There are optional English subtitles, a trailer, a 7-minute montage of promotional photos, a nice 18-minute interview with Thompson, who shares his memories about the shoot and talks a bit about the rest of his career, and an excellent 27-minute interview with producer and co-director Nico Mastorakis, who talks extensively about the film's production. He explains that Peter Rader was initially hired as a director, but wasn't quite ready for the big leagues—as that opening scene suggests—so Mastorakis had to step in and direct the rest of the film himself. He talks about how difficult Reed was to work with—in the middle of one expensive, multiple camera shot, Reed unzipped his pants and relieved himself—and how great all of the other cast members were. He describes how each of the film's major action sequences was staged, goes over other details about the shoot, and carefully describes the chain of events that led to a young stuntman being killed during a helicopter accident and what the fallout from that was like. He seems to hold nothing back, and it is a concise summary of how the film came into existence.

As a commentary, there is a feature-length interview with editor Barry Zetlin, who talks about his entire career. While he does mention **Hired to Kill** when they get to that point in his filmography, he doesn't have that much to say about it, and there is never a reference to what is occurring on the screen. Zetlin's reminiscences of working with a wide range of famous low budget producers, including Roger Corman, are terrific, and he talks quite a bit about how he does his job. "Editing, whether it is to create suspense or comedy, or tragedy, it all comes down to pacing and combining visuals with sound. When you're trying to create this sense of horror and tension through chases and trying to escape, you look at the material. This goes back to my documentary days, studying the material and coming up in your mind what will work best. That's how it is with a suspense scene. You look, you use your instincts. As an editor, that's what you have to have, the instinct to know what will make something tense. How long do you stay on a shot? Maybe it's just a POV into the woods. How long do you stay before it becomes slow and boring. Or, if you cut it too short, it may feel jarring, so that's just an instinct that an editor has to have." He points out that in the old days, if an editor had to change a scene and experiment, he had to remember how he did the scene before if he decided that the experiment didn't work, while today's editing with computers allows for endless experimentation without the fear of losing something that was working better. When the exploitation film market subsided, Zetlin moved on to reality television, and won several Emmys.

Additionally, Mastorakis' original script, with handwritten corrections, is available on BD-ROM in pdf format. A DVD platter is also included in the release that has all of the same special features.

Formula romance

Once in a while, we like to check out a formula program to marvel at the intricacies of its marketing strategy and how well it does or does not integrate the various components of cinema. **Love Finds You in Valentine**, from Anchor Bay Entertainment (UPC#013132644011, \$23), is part of a series of telefilms that have been created to be amenable to viewers with strong religious values. That does not mean that the shows themselves have in any way a religious orientation, it's just that viewers who are strongly religious will not come across anything within the entertainment that will offend their sensibilities. There is precisely one brief scene in **Valentine** that is set inside of a church, and its purpose, other than a very minor narrative advancement, seems to be to assure the viewer that all of the 'good' characters in the story attend church regularly. Otherwise, the 2016 feature is wholly

predictable but, as with all well-made telefilms, reasonably addictive.

Michaela McManus stars as a law school graduate who inherits a ranch she has never seen. It's a bit complicated, but basically her mother had married for love on the wrong side of the tracks and left town. The lawyer representing her is advising her to sell the place, but the will stipulated that she see it for herself first, and there's a hunky guy living there, taking care of the horses. Her city boyfriend, on the other hand, is pressuring her to sign away the place and get back. Running 91 minutes, the romance proceeds at a relaxed pace, and is combined with a subplot involving a stalker on the estate, another involving a crooked lawyer, and a conciliation with an estranged relative. In the show's beginning, there is a lot of talk about the 'traditions' of the 'estate' and then when you actually see the house, it's McMansion that was built ten years earlier, tops, but that incongruity aside, the program has lovely cinematography, a nice musical score, an attractive cast and decent performances. Doug Morgado co-stars, and two TV legends were also roped into the show, Lindsay Wagner, who really ought to be working more than she is, and Ed Asner, whose performance is outstanding. Often you will see a very elderly movie star cast in a show and it will turn out that the individual has lost the ability to act. They will say their lines, but without any persuasive feelings. Asner's character is ancient, but it is a strong emotional part and he delivers it flawlessly, both with his body language and his line readings. So the show, which was shot in rural Ohio, is slick and it delivers its dramatic beats with a dependable rhythm, but to see Asner work his magic is almost enough reason to check it out even if you could care less about horses or romance.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.78:1 and an accommodation for enhanced 16:9 playback. The image transfer is impeccable. The 5.1-channel Dolby Digital sound has a fine dimensionality. There are optional English and Spanish subtitles.

Doing the Watusi

James Clavell wrote the screenplay for **Watusi**, a 1958 MGM production, released by Warner Home Video as an *Archive Collection* title (UPC#888574374297, \$22), about the 'son' of the **King Solomon's Mines** hero, Alan Quartermain, returning to Africa to grab some more jewels. George Montgomery stars, with David Farrar as his father's old friend, who agrees to go on the journey, and Taina Elg as the daughter of a slain missionary that they meet during the course of their journey. At first, the story seems utterly formulaic, but gradually, Clavell starts messing with the format. For example, normally in this sort of film, Montgomery's character would have weaknesses, since he has never been to Africa before, but he was raised so intensely by his knowledgeable father that he can speak the local dialects perfectly and knows when to watch out for snakes. He and the older Farrar character sort of compete for the girl, but there are scenes when they are standing together shirtless, quite happy that she is off somewhere else, taking a bath (seriously—you're out in the middle of the jungle, with all sorts of icky things everywhere, would you really go skinny dipping?). Directed by Kurt Neumann and running 85 minutes, the film is a standard African adventure, but it is just lively enough to keep a viewer modestly engaged.

The picture is presented in letterboxed format only, with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1 and an accommodation for enhanced 16:9 playback. The transfer is very good, and here is how we know: For the scenes shot on a soundstage, hues are rich and fleshtones are porcelain. The stock footage, on the other hand, is somewhat grainy, and a lot of the location footage, even footage involving the stars, looks faded, but we would assume, based on the condition of the best looking scenes, that the rest of the movie came that way. The monophonic sound is fine and there is no captioning. Viewers should be warned that, besides the fact that the heroes talk about dividing the treasure they're going to find 'three ways,' as if the faithful African helper traveling with them doesn't count (ehh, he dies in a nasty booby trap, anyway), there is horrific and disgusting stock footage of an elephant being shot in the head. The only mitigating factor to that brief segment is the reaction of the other elephants, who immediately embrace the victim with sorrow and turn to look at the shooter with what-the-hell-did-you-do-that-for anger in their eyes.

They don't make movies like they used to

A very enjoyable desert adventure, MGM's 1954 **Valley of the Kings**, has been released as a Warner Home Video *Archive Collection* (UPC#888574389680, \$22). Set in 1900, Robert Taylor is an archeologist working in Egypt and Eleanor Parker is an antiquities expert who comes to him with a lead for finding a hidden tomb. Carlos Thompson plays her rather slimy husband. Shot quite a bit on location, the film runs a brisk 86 minutes and uses intrigue and betrayal to keep the plot churning along, but what is really fun about the film is the stunts that are staged in Egypt, including a cart chase through the crowded streets of Cairo, a well-executed dust storm, and the film's pinnacle moment, a knee-quivering fight on one of the heads at the Abu Simbel temples. The sequence could very well have served as the inspiration for the Mount Rushmore sequence in **North by Northwest**, except that unlike the latter, which was done entirely on a soundstage, the producers for **Valley of the Kings** actually had real stuntmen on top of the statues for part of the shoot.

The picture is presented in letterboxed format only, with an aspect ratio of about 1.78:1 and an accommodation for enhanced 16:9 playback. The color transfer is adequate, although hues are somewhat bland. It may be the cinematography and film stock to begin with, however, and otherwise, the presentation is in decent shape. The monophonic sound is fine and there is no captioning. A trailer is included.