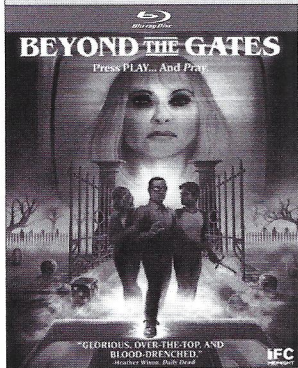


BEYOND THE GATES

Directed by Jackson Stewart
(2016) IFC Midnight/ Scream Factory Blu-ray



IFC Midnight/Shout! Factory's Scream Factory team up to unleash this recent genre fest favorite and feature debut from filmmaker Jackson Stewart—an affectionate throwback to all things '80s horror and that era's brief fad of VCR board games.

The latter was certainly a niche fascination—traditional designed cardboard with or without your conventional tokens or figurines, plus the added bonus of a videocassette to guide the gameplay. In terms of horror, *Nightmare* (which morphed into Australia's *Atmosfear*)—and its three expansion packs—became the most popular of its kind in North America. A series of demonic “hosts” (most famously The Gatekeeper) would

hurl insults at the players from the television set, referring to your friends as “maggots” if you landed on an unforgiving spot. Director/co-writer Jackson Stewart and co-writer Stephen Scarlata (*Jodorowsky's Dune*) pool together their arcane knowledge of these unique gems and tie it to a family drama—chiefly, the disappearance of a father that instigates the reunion of two estranged brothers.

As brothers, Gordon (Graham Skipper) and John (Chase Williamson) have a fractured, untrusting relationship. Coming to town with girlfriend Margot (Brea Grant), Gordon must come to grips with the disappearance of their father, plus pack up and pawn off the remains of the family business—a video store—with brother John. In a rare amiable moment, Gordon and John discover the titular board game—hosted by a possessed and lively Barbara Crampton (*Re-Animator*) in black-and-white footage—and decide upon a spontaneous gaming session. This dip into the unrealities of a possessed game give *Beyond The Gates* its horror frissons, and pave the way to definitive answers for the whereabouts of the missing father.

The story lurches forward in the early stages, as Stewart and his performers only infer painful back stories: the meek Gordon is clearly a reformed alcoholic, who (most likely)—at one time—inflicted abuse on his girlfriend Margot (Brea Grant) while intoxicated. The deterioration of the kinship between Gordon and John is never directly addressed, but one suspects there are numerous trust issues involved (a deleted scene —John stealing money from the backroom of the family video store—may offer up some easy answers Stewart decided against).

The film, befitting its small budget (\$300,000), is populated with a few colorful supporting players. Matt Mercer is a quirky small town police officer who'll become mixed up with the game. Hank (Justin Welborn) is a belligerent drunk friend of John's—he meets a nasty demise in the film's first turn to horror. But most worthwhile is Elric (Jesse Merlin), the dapper, sinister owner of a curiosity shop. Merlin's foreboding intonations add to the plot, even if his ultimate game plan is left unexplained.

Director Stewart has an indelible knack of conjuring up the indescribable, heightened moods of the 1980s home video store era, stylistically and thematically. But there's a quaint sadness to some of it. Most of the film is set inside of a video store—the real-life Eddie Brandt's Saturday Matinee in Los Angeles—but although shelves are full of videocassettes, the lack of customers (it is closed, after all) hammers home that it's from a bygone time—a harbinger of the dissipated happiness for the brothers, their family, the customers, and the town.

Stewart and Scarlata have studied those films held in reverence and paid in tribute (as name-checked in interviews/commentary tracks): Tibor Takacs' *The Gate* (1987) and Lucio Fulci's *The Beyond* (1980). The garish neon that becomes a motif in the film's last act doesn't come off as slavish devotion the way some recent retro genre reconstructions have; it's a doorway to the styles of a different decade.

On the bonus features front, there are two brief deleted scenes (lasting just under 3 minutes) that really wouldn't have added much to the narrative. A behind-the-scenes featurette (10:59) provides cast and crew interviews and footage from the set.

More elucidating are a Q&A (hosted by Stuart Gordon) with all the principals, and three commentary tracks—two feature director Stewart. On the first one, he's joined by Barbara Crampton, Jesse Merlin, director of photography Brian Sowell, and co-writer Scarlata; and on the second group track, he's with Chase Williamson, Brea Grant and Graham Skipper.

The first is more technical, with the second—considering it's comprised of most of the cast—focuses on the acting on parade in the film.

The third is an odd bonus: commentary from the hosts of “Junk Food Dinner” podcast. (As relayed on the track, it's Jackson Stewart's favorite.)

Also included on the disc is a short film by Stewart—*Sex Boss*—that features both Skipper and Merlin, plus a faux “retro commercial” for the *Beyond The Gates* game (highly recommended).

Aaron Graham

THE SLAYER

Directed by J.S. Cardone
(1982) Arrow Video Blu-ray/DVD combo



Mishandled by its distributor, *The Slayer* sank like a stone at the box office in 1982. Its initial home video release was hamstrung when it was named a “video nasty” by Britain's National Viewers and Listeners Association, a classification which put *The Slayer* in the company of other allegedly obscene and sadistic movies including *The Last House on the Left* (1972), *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978), and *The Burning* (1981). This notoriety might have sparked an ironic resurgence for the *The Slayer*, making it a must-see for curious and defiant horror fans. But a sizable cult following never materialized and the picture continued to languish in obscurity. It was issued in the U.S. only in a double-feature VHS edition, with 10 minutes slashed from its runtime so it could be squeezed onto one tape with its co-feature (Fred Olen Ray's *Scalps*, 1983).

Now, finally, Arrow Films has rescued *The Slayer* from video purgatory and given the film its first legitimate American release in any digital format. While not a monumental rediscovery, it's certainly a welcome one. This offbeat, stylish, and engrossing picture is a slasher movie for people who don't like slasher movies—or for people who like them so much they've seen all the familiar standbys and are ready for something that shakes up the usual formula.

The story revolves around moody artist Kay (Sarah Kendall) and her husband David (Alan McRae), who fly to a remote island, accessible only by plane or boat, for a long overdue vacation. Also along for the holiday are Kay's brother Eric (Frederick Flynn) and his wife Brooke (Carol Cottonbrook). It seems like an idyllic spot, but Kay is plagued by recurring violent nightmares that have plagued her since childhood. Soon the vacationers become trapped on the island by an approaching storm and members of the party begin turning up dead.

The film's murder set pieces are as brutal and bizarre as you would expect from a slasher movie—including a beheading and deaths by pitchfork and fish hooks. The performances and dialogue operate on the same level as most other low-budget slasher flicks of the era. But very little else plays out quite as expected. Writer-director J.S. Cardone and co-writer William R. Ewing structure the narrative so that events can be interpreted in several different ways. Is a deranged killer hiding on the island? Is Kay committing these crimes while sleepwalking? Are Kay's dreams unleashing some murderous supernatural agency? (Kay's desperate plight to avoid sleep foreshadows *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, released two years later.) The film's clever final scene invites still more speculation. Is it a flashback? Or does it suggest that the story was all a dream, or perhaps a premonition? Or maybe that these characters are trapped in an endless, *Twilight Zone*-like time loop?

Since *The Slayer* takes pains not to fully explain itself, the viewers' enjoyment of this film will depend largely on his or her comfort with such narrative ambiguity. It's also a movie that demands patience, especially when presented in its complete 90-minute form, which allows tension to build slowly as we get to know the characters. I found it refreshing and beguiling, but your mileage may vary.

The Slayer is a movie that, at least until now, had a small following of fans, but a bunch of them seem to be employed by Arrow Films, which lavished an astonishing amount of TLC on this release. For starters, they present the film in a scintillating 4K restoration from the original negative, at its full length, in its correct 1.85:1 aspect ratio, and with its color timing corrected—all for the first time. The original mono audio was also restored. The movie has literally never looked better, since the color timing was off even during its brief theatrical run.

On top of that, Arrow piles on a mountain of supplements, including a 52-minute Making Of documentary, a 13-minute featurette about the film's locations on Tybee Island in coastal Georgia, four alternate audio tracks, the original theatrical trailer, and a 10-minute (!) stills gallery. The audio supplements include two commentaries, one with Cardone, Kottenbrook, and executive producer Eric Weston, moderated by Ewan Cant; the other by a British slasher fan consortium known as The Hysteria Continues. There's also an isolated music track combined with an interview with composer Robert Folk. Finally, fans can choose to relive the experience of watching the film with an audience at the Tybee Post Theater (a historic venue which served as one of the film's locations), complete with a video introduction, a filmed question-and-answer session following, and the recorded cheering and hooting of the crowd audible during the film. It's a stunning package for such an overlooked film without a major built-in audience.

Mark Clark