

## MONDO ROMERO!

**GEORGE A. ROMERO: BETWEEN NIGHT AND DAWN**  
(\$99.95, 6-disc Blu-ray Arrow Video) 11/17

Arrow's invaluable set assembles the three feature films George Romero directed between 1968's *Night of the Living Dead* and 1978's *Dawn of the Dead* (more accurately between *Night* and 1976's *Martin*, which will hopefully surface as a future Blu-ray). The third film, the classic 1973 paranoid thriller *The Crazies* was reviewed earlier (VS #27) and, with its 2009 remake, served as the subject of a Tim Ferrante and Scott Voisin *Split Screen* column (VS #82), so the focus here is on the set's more elusive titles, 1971's *There's Always Vanilla* and 1972's *Season of the Witch* (aka *Jack's Wife*).

**THERE'S ALWAYS VANILLA** (1971)  
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D: George Romero. Ray Laine, Judith Ridley, Johanna Lawrence, Richard Ricci, Roger McGovern, Ron Jaye. 93 mins.

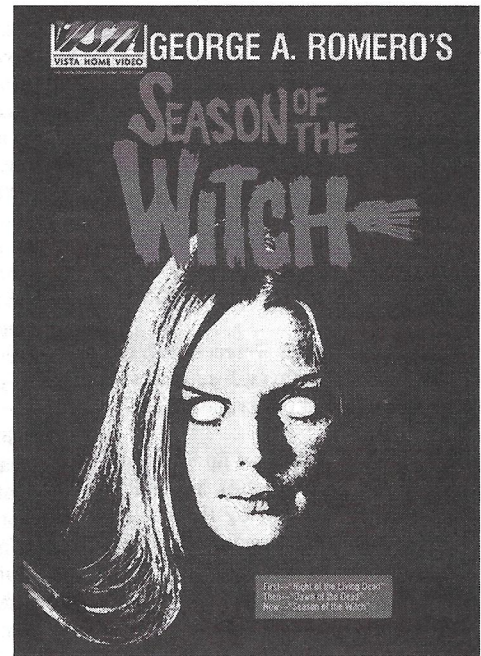
After completing *Night*, Romero gravitated to the wannabe hip and happening "youth" drama *There's Always Vanilla* (aka *The Affair*), a feature-length expansion of a half-hour black-and-white film, *At Play with the Angels*, starring Ray Laine and written and directed by Romero cohort Rudy Ricci. In *Vanilla*, Laine toplines as Chris, a typically smug, perpetually amused '60s musician/slacker (with a rich dad) and a chronic sufferer of what used to be known back in the day as Elliot Gould Syndrome (a thankfully since-cured malaise)—he's the only one who, with his built-in BS detector and psychological X-ray vision, can clearly perceive modern life's myriad hypocrisies and absurdities (you know, or probably once knew, the type). Romero opens the film with a lyrical, if clichéd image of two colorful balloons free-floating against an azure sky set to the strains of "Wild Mountain Thyme." We almost immediately crash to Earth, zeroing in on urban gawkers surrounding an alfresco device called the Ultimate Machine, an elaborate, expensive Rube Goldberg-style contraption that appears to serve no useful purpose, a metaphor for encroaching corporate culture and its manufactured consumerism. Chris then addresses the camera, as he does at arbitrary intervals throughout the film, to share his faux-hippie free-spirit observations. The movie soon morphs into sort of a Pittsburgh-placed *Darling* with the introduction of foxy commercial model Lynn (*Night*'s doomed ingenue Ridley under her married name Judith Streiner), first seen on the hectic set of a fantasy-enhanced beer ad. Chris and Lynn, who radiates a bit of a homegrown Brigitte Bardot vibe, quickly connect for a fling that runs the gamut from

groovy romantic montages to a harrowing sequence in an illicit abortionist's office (complete with a cameo by *Night*'s erstwhile Sheriff McClelland, George Kosana, as a scary medical henchman). Along the way, Romero displays his considerable cinematic skills with imaginative shots and ironic touches but overall seems to be borrowing, liberally and ill-advisedly, from John Cassavetes' muse. Today, *Vanilla* succeeds more as a regional time capsule—for starters, it's the only pic to proffer a whirlwind inside tour of the Steel City advertising world—than a compelling film in its own right, though it certainly rates a look for armchair counter-culture historians as well as Romero completists. Arrow extras include *Affair of the Heart: The Making of There's Always Vanilla*, a new documentary with actors Ridley and Ricci, producers John Russo and Russ Streiner and soundman Gary Streiner; an audio commentary by Travis Crawford; *Digging Up the Dead: The Lost Films of George A. Romero*, an archival interview with Romero discussing *Vanilla* and *Season of the Witch*; a location gallery, and more.

**SEASON OF THE WITCH** (aka *JACK'S WIFE*) (1972)⌘⌘

D: George Romero. Jan White, Bill Thunhurst, Ray Laine, Joedda McClain, Ann Muffly, Neil Fisher. 90 mins.

Following *Vanilla*, Romero scripted, directed, shot (in 16mm, later blown up to 35mm) and edited *Jack's Wife* (1972). A raw but frequently effective fable, the film deals with the mental meltdown of Joan Mitchell (not to be confused with Joni), an upper-class, early middle-aged woman (soap opera actress White in a bravura performance), something of a variation on *Night*'s Helen Cooper (Marilyn Eastman) a rung or two up the social ladder and a few years down the road. Alienated from her husband Jack (Thunhurst) and prattling femme friends, deserted by her runaway college-age daughter Nikki (McClain) and engaged in an ill-advised affair with the latter's snarky, head games-playing sometimes boyfriend Greg (Laine), Joan seeks release by drifting into amateur witchcraft. Driven by simultaneously harrowing and ironic (and often brilliant) symbol-laden dream sequences, frequent extreme close-ups and intense confrontational acting, the picture is, like *Vanilla*, more reminiscent of John Cassavetes' *Faces*—with a dash of Bergman-style depression and a pinch of Felliniesque surrealism—than *Rosemary's Baby*. That Roman Polanski chiller, then (and still) the yardstick for witchcraft films, even receives an onscreen reference, as does *The Graduate*, with Greg calling Joan "Mrs. Robinson." Powerful, even profound images abound. Greg's humiliation of Joan's loud, tipsy friend Shirley (Muffly), tricked into believing she's smoking her first joint, is almost too uncomfortably real to endure. Two nightmare segments likewise stand out. One is the film's opening sequence, when Joan is led Svengali-like by a casually callous Jack through autumnal woods, where sharp, bare branches slap and slash her face, on



the way to their ultimate destination: Joan's outdoor kennel (!). Another heart-racing dream sees Joan pursued through her house by a hideously masked killer (*Night*'s cemetery zombie Bill Hinzman, again in a menacing mode). In an earlier fantasy scene, a slick salesman leads Joan on a tour of her own barren existence, including a mirror that shows a reflection of an old lady Joan. This heady and horrific material is partially undermined by some uneven acting and persistent pacing problems. Although far more of an artistic success than *Vanilla*, *Jack's Wife* experienced similar budgetary woes. As Romero once commented: "Not only did it suffer from being a \$250,000 movie, but it suffered from being a \$250,000 movie that had to get made for a hundred grand! The differences between this and *Rosemary's Baby* are vast in terms of just execution. But thematically it's there. *Jack's Wife* was really sort of a feminist picture. The beginning days of women's liberation, and so forth. Even though I wrote it, I wrote it based on the feelings and observations of some female friends of mine." With its paucity of true horror overtones (although the filmmaker incorporates a neat *Night* nod with a comic "zombie" moment in Jack and Joan's bedroom), the movie, like *Vanilla*, presented a major marketing problem. Distributor Jack H. (The Blob) Harris ultimately reedited the film with radical cuts and tried to disguise it as an erotic exploitation venture under the dubious moniker *Hungry Wives*, but that likewise failed to fly. The film eventually surfaced on VHS in 1985 as *Season of the Witch* (with Donovan's titular tune on the soundtrack); that misleading title disappointed fright fans looking for a jolt of anticipated Romero madness a la *Night*. Extras include *Season*'s alternate 104-minute extended version; a Travis Crawford commentary; an interview with Romero by filmmaker/fan Guillermo del Toro; an archival interview with Jan White, and more. ⌘

—The Phantom