

# SEASON OF THE WITCH

by CHRIS WADE

## Saluting a Lost Romero Classic...

In the supposed "lost era" of Romero's career, in between the releases of NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD and DAWN OF THE DEAD, the man most known as the King of the Zombies made some interesting, unjustly sidelined pictures that, if you do ever come across them, still hold up. Granted, they are not as punchy, cool or quotable as DAWN and NIGHT, but they are worthy of your time. The movies made in that decade gap were varied, colorful, bold and daring, and unfortunately none of them have gotten even half of the credit they deserve.

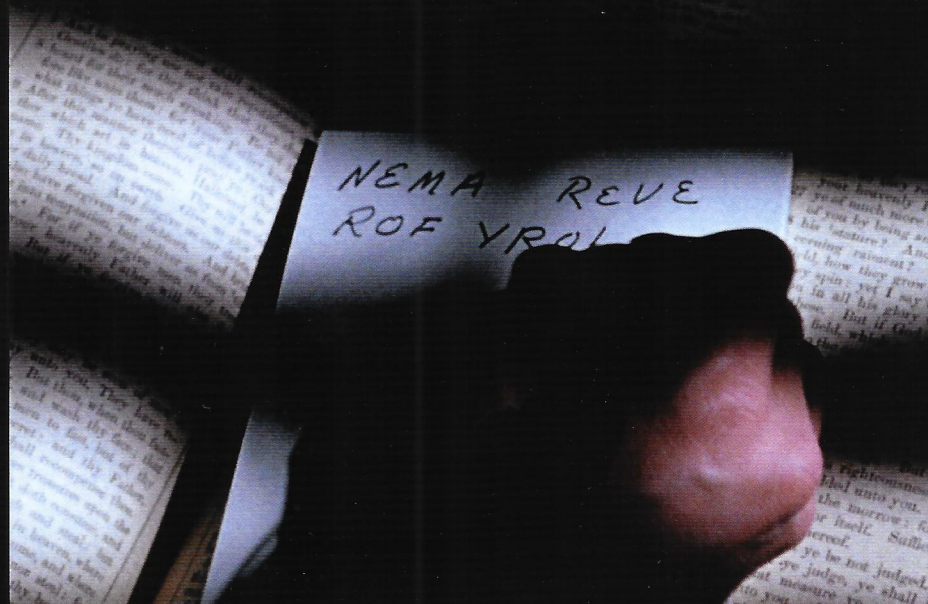
After the smash success with his game-changing debut, Romero came back with something unexpected. While Hollywood had come knocking asking for a zombie follow up, he relented, retreated from the undead and made the subtle, underwhelming comic drama THERE'S ALWAYS VANILLA. It sank by the wayside, and though it has its moments, it was his next film which deserves the credit from this rather muted post-NIGHT era. SEASON OF THE WITCH was another low-budget flick, released in 1973, also under the titles HUNGRY WIVES and JACK'S WIFE. SEASON OF THE WITCH, though, you have to admit, is a much more eye-catching title. (Incidentally, SEASON OF THE WITCH was also the working title for Martin Scorsese's 1973 crime classic MEAN STREETS, inspired by the single by British pop star Donovan.)

"THERE'S ALWAYS VANILLA and

JACK'S WIFE were seen by very few people," Romero said in one fairly recent interview, "and I am not sure what my fans today would make of them. Maybe they'll see a little bit of my style, maybe they'll see a little bit of my head in there. There is always something instinctive. You can look at an artist's work and you can maybe see a little something there."

Romero had a point. SEASON OF THE WITCH (the title I am going to refer to this film by) may not seem totally typical a subject matter for Romero, our zombie godfather, but there is much more to him than the flesh hungry. He was a masterful director in the truest sense, a man more inspired by the magic of Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger's TALES OF HOFFMAN than Hammer Horror. Consider his most iconic work and what sticks out is the technique—the camera angles, the "cover your ass" shooting method (get as much as you can from as many angles as possible), the set ups and the way he framed a dramatic situation. He establishes a mood of fear, dread and utter hopelessness, but never gets us too bogged down in the negative aspects of the dichotomies the characters were stuck in. He may have used gore, but never as the premier attraction. It was a tool to remind you that the fear the characters were feeling was justified.

SEASON OF THE WITCH definitely stands alone in his filmography, although stylistically it is very much a Romero film.





The direction, for instance, brings to mind some of the most chilling moments of *NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD*. Whether a complete zombie junkie will find something to take away is another matter.

Undoubtedly, what hindered the wide discovery of this film was its messy release. Filmed as *JACK'S WIFE*, Romero and his small, reliable crew were intent on shooting a proper study of the occult with their tiny \$100,000 budget. However, the film's distributor got busy with the film reels, cutting out integral scenes, and decided to put it out into the world as a kind of soft core porno flick, under the awful title *THE HUNGRY WIVES*. It went out in 1973 to a non-response. In fact, it wasn't until he made good with *DAWN OF THE DEAD* in 1978 that the film was re-released and, of course, reappraised under its new title *SEASON OF THE WITCH*. With such a muddled past, perhaps one can see why Romero never fully accepted it as a proper part of his filmography.

The film takes place in Pittsburgh, where bored wife Joan Mitchell (played by Jan White) gets tired of her violent, sexist husband's ways. As she and her friends discover Marion (Virginia Greenwald), a new mysterious addition to the neighborhood, Joan begins to learn about witchcraft. After a tarot reading, it is revealed that Marion is the leader of a witches' coven. When Joan grows even lonelier and more frustrated, she obtains a book about witchcraft. In a



strange twist, she puts a spell on Gregg (Raymond Laine)—the man who is seeing her daughter (Joedda McClain)—so that he becomes attracted to her. In between this, Joan has consistently horrific nightmares, and in the end, kills her husband before joining Marion's coven.

As straightforward horror, *SEASON OF THE WITCH* is not exactly frightening. Instead, it deals with the occult in a more literal and intelligent way, and is never over-the-top nor sensationally unbelievable. Where the movie is perhaps more

interesting is in its underlying subtext. Clearly, Romero is using the witches' coven as a symbolic manifestation of the women's movement, a neat metaphor with the witches being feminists rising up against sexist and dominating males. Romero using feminism in film was nothing radical for him though; in many ways he was one of the first forward-thinking, radical, casually feminist directors in the horror genre, or any genre for that matter.

Romero's feminist leanings didn't begin right away with his first film though, at



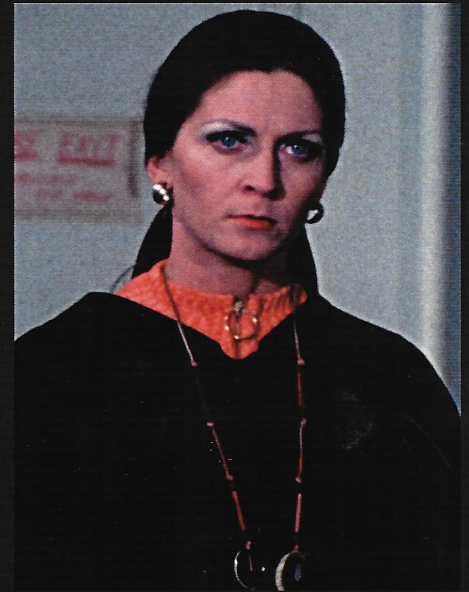
least not by his own choice. Like his openness to casting black lead actors, his knack of writing strong female characters developed over time. In *NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD*, Barbara is little more than a catatonic cardboard cutout, as much a zombie as the creeping flesh eaters outside the barn. She is the quintessential horror film 'chick', essentially setting the mold of the slasher victim, running and screaming from the creatures, being no use to herself or anyone through most of the picture. Gaylen Ross's character in *DAWN OF THE DEAD*, however (as pregnant and morning sick as she was throughout), is not a screamer, nor a hopeless flier of the dead. Even if it's only due to the fact that Gaylen refused to scream as the script wished her to, she was a step towards Sigourney Weaver in *ALIEN* territory. *SEASON OF THE WITCH* then, put out before *DAWN* to little fanfare, was more direct in its revolutionary approach, however conscious or unconscious it all was.

Acclaim has come its way since. Weirdly,

the AV Club saw it as a long lost cousin to Ang Lee's acclaimed movie *THE ICE STORM*, in as much that both films, in very different ways, reflect a changing time in early '70s suburbia, exploring the forbidden, and the mysterious goings-on in what appears to be the average neighborhood. I would liken it to the 1985 Madonna hit *DESPERATELY SEEKING SUSAN*, which of course seems to be a very odd comparison on the surface. Yet in that film, Rosanna Arquette plays an upper middle class housewife, bored of her marriage to a wealthy business man. Her friends might envy her for all the shallow materialism of her life, but she is trapped and seeks escapism. Whereas Arquette's character chooses to follow the exotic life of wild child Susan (Madonna), whose adventures she follows in the local paper, here Joan Mitchell, the hungry wife, turns to the liberating power of witchcraft. So is this horror? Is this a film of witchcraft and the occult? Yes and no. Again, Romero is simply using the horror template to explore something with more

depth, which separates him from your average schlock/shock maestro. Whereas he seemed a little lost in the midst of *THERE'S ALWAYS VANILLA*—a film much closer to Brian De Palma's early New York art house pictures (*HI MOM* and *GREETINGS*), both starring a young Robert De Niro) than anything Romero-esque—*SEASON OF THE WITCH* feels like a Romero film, and he is very much in his own territory.

Although the original cut is not in existence (despite the odd deleted scene popping up here and there), the currently available version of the film is the closest we will get to Romero's vision. There are some undeniably good scenes, up there with George's finest cinematic standouts. The mood he sets in the scene when Joan hears her daughter having an orgasm during the



storm is utterly uncomfortable and very powerful, especially when you consider the fact she is actually semi-masturbating to the sound of her daughter making love. But it's the shadows that cast themselves, and the imposing statues in close up, which make the scene truly unforgettable. She is the ultimate bored housewife, reduced to getting off on her own daughter getting her rocks off. Again, as in *NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD*, Romero blows apart the established standard dynamic of the modern family household, disturbing and delighting in equal measure.

"There's only one that I would like to remake which is actually the third film that I made, called *SEASON OF THE WITCH*," Romero told *Cinema Blend*, "and I didn't have enough money to do it well and I think that I could really do a good job with it today. I've sort of been noodling on an updated script for it, but it's the only one that I would even think about remaking. Most of my stuff was sort of of-the-time." Unfortunately, Romero never got around to revisiting his lost project, but one can at least enjoy *SEASON OF THE WITCH* as a curious relic, a neglected gem by a man whose every committed frame is worthy of your time.

