

## THE RIGHTEOUS

Directed by Mark O'Brien  
(2021) Arrow Video Blu-ray

Frederic Mason (Henry Czerny—*The Exorcism of Emily Rose*, 2005), a former priest, and his wife, Ethel (Mimi Kuzyk—*The Day After Tomorrow*, 2004; "Hill Street Blues") are grieving the death of their adopted daughter. The girl's troubled birth mother, Doris (Kate Corbett—*It Chapter Two*, 2019; "Good Witch"), is friends with the Masons and searches for peace from her past mistakes.

Struggling with his faith, Frederic seeks a sympathetic ear from his ecclesiastic friend, Graham (Nigel Bennett—*The Shape of Water*, 2017; *The Skulls*, 2000); however, he finds no help or consolation. He's unable to reconcile the loss of his child with what he believes about God and is burdened by past sins for which he seeks penance.

The couple's isolated existence is shattered one night by the arrival of Aaron Smith (writer/director Mark O'Brien—*Bad Times at the El Royale*, 2018; "Halt and Catch Fire"), a wounded young man who immediately becomes an awkward, mysterious, and unsettling presence in the home. One moment he has the warmth and affability of Lon Chaney Jr.'s Lennie Small from *Of Mice and Men* (1939) and the next he's more akin to Robert DeNiro in *Cape Fear* (1991). He poses cryptic questions but rarely answers any put to him, and an atmosphere of dreadful apprehension surrounds him. When he makes one simple request that pulls Frederic's sins into the light, everything changes. Frederic must confront the secrets he has kept if he hopes to find atonement and peace.

Essentially a psychological chamber piece, *The Righteous* is a story of desperation. Except for Graham and Sheriff Hutton (Mayko Nguyen—"Killjoys"), every character is caught in some form of desperation. Aaron's peculiar introduction grips the viewer by the throat and never lets up, playing with the audience's expectations as Frederic must re-evaluate his theology. The stark black-and-white cinematography fully captures the themes of loss, guilt, shame, and existential misery. O'Brien is mesmerizing in the role of Aaron, making us intrigued but wary about the character, and showing the depth of his emotional range. Czerny is likewise captivating. As the layers of Frederic's life and essence are peeled away and revealed, viewers will recognize places in their own lives that may still haunt them. Both Aaron and Frederic force us to consider what we believe about some of life's most existential questions.

The film exists within a Catholic framework, but Frederic's struggle for answers is universal. Questions about God and faith, about justice and guilt, about regret and atonement are all present, yet O'Brien never allows the story to become preachy or maudlin. You cannot look away for fear of missing the most subtle expression or a suggestive bit of body language. The film is a triumph that only reveals its nuances with repeated viewings.

Arrow Video's presentation of *The Righteous* meets their usual standard of excellence. Blacks are solid while the gray palette has tremendous differentiation that balances every scene. The 5.1 DTS-HD Master Audio is crisp and clean and there's an alternate 2.0 LPCM soundtrack option. Since the film relies heavily on dialogue the audio is more than capable of keeping it clear.

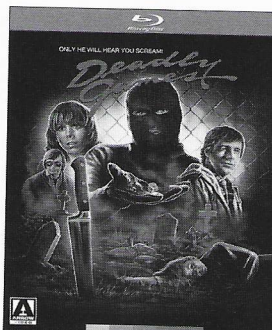
Extras are plentiful, and for the most part worthwhile. The sole exception is the audio commentary by Mark O'Brien and editor K. Spencer Jones. There are long periods of time with no commentary while the two watch what's happening on screen. The rest is mostly a play-by-play rehash of what's happening onscreen. Without a moderator or even an apparent outline to go by, the duo misses a rich opportunity to delve into the technical and psychological details of the film.

Where the commentary drops the ball, the cast and crew interviews pick it up and run with it. Interviews with O'Brien (33:47), Czerny (17:08), Kuzyk and Corbett (17:17), K. Spencer Jones (11:04), cinematographer Scott McClellan (10:02), and production designer Jason Clarke (9:26) provide more depth and insight into the making of the film. These are essential viewing. Also included is a Grimmfest Q&A with O'Brien (19:36), a Fantasia 2021 Stage Presentation/Q&A (32:35), a Radio Silence roundtable (73:00), and theatrical trailer. The original soundtrack by Andrew Staniland is presented with a slideshow of stills from the film (65:17).

Arrow Video's first pressing also includes a 20-page booklet featuring the usual production photos, details, and credits, along with cast and crew information. There's also an essay by Sean Hogan titled "Washed in the Blood: Spirituality in the Modern Horror Film." The artwork on the reversible case insert is by Grant Boland and Oink Creative.

O'Brien's directorial debut weaves a taut, haunted, and at times uncomfortable web that sticks to the audience and refuses any simplistic or easy interpretation. By the end, the viewer must decide if Frederic has found the absolution he's looking for, or if his actions play a pivotal role in bringing about God's final judgment.

J. Todd Kingree



## DEADLY GAMES

Directed by Scott Mansfield  
(1982) Arrow Video Blu-ray

The slasher film wave of the late 70s/early 80s brought all kinds of filmmakers out of the woodwork to join the party. It seemed like almost any sort of slasher material coupled with a catchy title could find distribution, and these pictures were exceedingly cheap to make. Some of those who decided to ride the wave, in fact, were not all that enamored of the genre but took the

opportunity to get their work before the public, nonetheless. One such striver was writer/director Scott Mansfield, whose *Deadly Games* (1982) turns out to be a proto-*Big Chill* homecoming romance overlaid with giallo-lite violence and a paper-thin mystery.

The film does have something of a following, perhaps because its almost complete abandonment of standard slasher formula resonates with some viewers as originality. Other fans enjoy the lip-service the film gives to classic horror. Characters (briefly) play a homemade-looking Universal Monsters board game, and lots of in-crowd name-dropping ensues. Also, one of the characters is running creaky, old *The Monster Walks* (1932) in the repertory theater he owns. Finally, some fans seem to enjoy the film's sheer goofiness and entirely unexpected approach.

Really, the only thing that qualifies *Deadly Games* as a slasher is a series of kills that plays out over the course of the picture. There aren't very many of them, and they are almost entirely bloodless, so buyer beware. They are perpetrated by a creepy masked killer however, and there is some nudity and sexual content in the film.

Our protagonist and (I guess) Final Girl is Keegan Lawrence (Jo Ann Harris), who has returned to her hometown following the mysterious death of her stepsister. Viewers know that the stepsister was murdered, but the cops, led by handsome local Roger Lane (Sam Groom) are still trying to figure things out. After beginning an extended flirtation with Roger, Keegan revisits her old social circle, who seem to be still focused on the same bed-hopping hijinks she recalls from her youth, despite rapidly approaching middle age. As Keegan becomes re-embroiled in hometown sexual politics, the killings resume.

*Deadly Games* is really an ensemble piece that wants us to care about this group of impossibly glib suburbanites who (thanks to Mansfield) constantly banter back and forth like characters in a 70s sitcom. Even a bizarrely-cast Dick Butkus (legendary Chicago Bears football player) is stuck with lines like, "She can sometimes be found down at the local disco with a wayward look in her eye!" The worst offender is Keegan, whose character is a supercharged amalgam of Annie Hall and Mary Richards, and who cannot dial back the relentless cute n' quirky for a single second. No matter the occasion, she has a quip for it.

It's also worth noting that the film quickly pares down its suspect list to two specific individuals, despite the fact that there are about ten potential red herrings running around. Seasoned mystery fans are likely to assume that this is somehow a diversionary tactic to distract us from guessing the real killer. Nope. It's one of the two most obvious choices, and story-wise, we really don't care which.

Steve Railsback gives the standout performance here, playing Billy, yet another twitchy misfit for his resume. Despite being a maladjusted social outcast with heavy PTSD and physical scars from Vietnam, Billy owns the largest, most beautiful restored grand old movie palace you ever saw, running money-makers like the aforementioned *The Monster Walks* and old Universal Horrors with nary a paying audience member in sight. The place even has an old Phantom of the Opera-style organ that rises up out of the stage. Billy is buddies with Roger, and the two somehow seem to have served together in Vietnam. The film lets us know a little too early that Roger is a controlling, sometimes violent jerk, and we wait for much of the remaining runtime for Keegan to figure it out, though to be fair she is never presented with any evidence of this until the last minute. While we do eventually learn the identity of the killer, the actual ending of the picture is bafflingly abrupt and ambiguous, and unlikely to satisfy anyone.

Despite all its flaws, Arrow's presentation of *Deadly Games* at least looks and sounds very good. Always rather soft in previous presentations, the film has been given a new 2K scan using the original camera negative, which lends the proceedings more immediacy and makes it a bit easier to get with the flow of this off-putting picture. The package also includes a respectable selection of extras, including a very appreciative and enthusiastic commentary from the *The Hysteria Continues* Podcast and a couple of cast/crew featurettes, along with the usual trailer and stills. To be honest, some viewers will enjoy this film for its unconventional approach to the slasher genre, while others may find it endlessly frustrating and off-putting.

Chris Herzog