

At the end of Tom Holland's classic 1985 vampire romp *Fright Night*, good old Charley Brewster (William Ragsdale) cuddles up to his rescued damsel Amy (Amanda Bearse) while a ridiculous movie blares away on his TV set. Said film—ostensibly *Mars Wants Flesh*, one of horror host Peter Vincent's (Roddy McDowall) presentations on his *Fright Night* show—features a rubbery fiend flopping its tentacles all over a screaming lass while wonky music lilt on the soundtrack. It's a brief scene, but one that sent this writer on a crusade to find out what it was—no mean feat in the pre-Internet age.

Years later, the same clip appeared in a similar horror-host context in Joe Dante's *Gremlins 2*, and it was around this time that I discovered the movie in question was in fact writer/director Harry Essex's ludicrous yet completely charming 1971 exploitation cheapie *Octaman*. Essex co-scripted the immortal 1954 Universal chiller *Creature from the Black Lagoon* (and wrote another of the studio's 3D sci-fi gems, *It Came from Outer Space*, plus many crime films and TV shows) and certainly, *Octaman* owes its DNA to that movie. The big difference, of course, is that, well...*Octaman*

OCTAMAN

stinks worse than yesterday's calamari!

But that very pungency isn't necessarily a bad thing; rather, it's what gives *Octaman* its goofball power. Essex's scenario sees a group of intrepid scientists saunter into a rural Mexican fishing town, where they trap the legendary beast of the title—a sea monster that looks like it wandered in from a Sid and Marty Krofft kids' show, but in reality was an early—very early—creation of too-many-times-decorated-to-count special FX wizard Rick Baker (see Dr. Cyclops on page 60 for another pioneering Baker beastie in *The Incredible Melting Man*). In truth, outside of its lumbering, wiggly gait, Baker's monster is actually pretty cool from the neck up, with an O-shaped mouth full of teeth and bulging eyeballs. Anyway, old Octaman ends up losing what little radiation-added marbles it has left and goes on a wild blood-

sucking rampage, killing as many folks as it can. It's grand fun.

Really, the biggest problem with this U.S./Mexican co-production is that it came out about 20 years too late. The earnest, expository patois of Essex's banter is pure 1950s still, and the cast's melodramatic line readings are as hand-to-forehead as you can get.

Speaking of that cast...it's a doozy. As the scientists, you have Kerwin Mathews, so burned into monster kids' brains from his turn in the classic *The 7th Voyage of Sinbad* (as well as his last film, John Stanley's overlooked 1977 creeper *Nightmare in Blood*) and Jeff Morrow, he of *This Island Earth* fame and one of the stars of the third Gill Man movie, *The Creature Walks Among Us*.

Thrown into the mix is beautiful Italian actress Pier Angeli, who was found dead shortly after *Octaman's* release (and incidentally, on this writer's birthday) of a lethal pill overdose. Insert cruel joke here. Oh, and in case you were wondering—which you probably were not—the "David Essex" listed prominently in the credit block is *not* the British pop singer and occasional actor, but rather Harry's son, who plays a grumpy Indian. No "Star-dust" warbling for this chief.

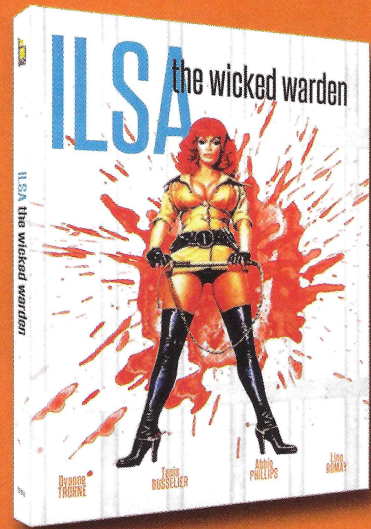
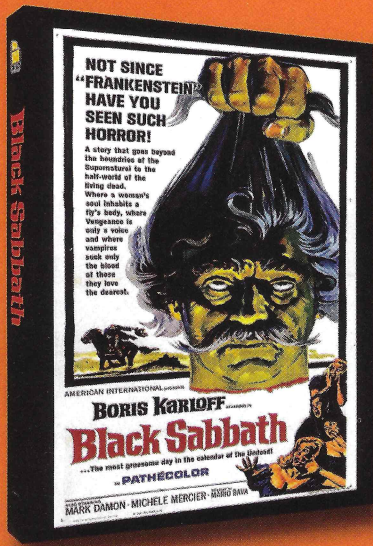
It's easy to poke fun at *Octaman*, and plenty of people have (and will). But seen as a classic creature feature, it's an honest mash that means well. There's a bit of surprisingly PG-rated gore to boot, and the stitched-together library score is endlessly effective, goosing every minute of the film with very busy and creepy ambience. The sound design is interesting too—and am I crazy, or is the weird sound *Octaman* makes similar to the one Foley artist Dick Damon ladled on the killer in his later work, 1976's *The Town That Dreaded Sundown*? Yeah, I'm probably crazy. *Octaman* has that effect on people.

You can sample the movie's charms in battered TV-print form from master bootleggers Cheezy Flicks, or via a special-edition DVD with a considerably prettier picture released last year by BayView Entertainment. Viva *Octaman*!

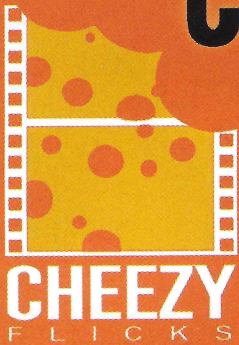
—Chris Alexander



What has eight legs and sucks? *Octaman*!



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