## Another Shawscope holiday package

For the past 4 years, every holiday season has seen the release of a massive Blu-ray collection of films from the legendary Hong Kong studio, Shaw Bros., in impressively curated boxed sets from Arrow Video, and this year is no exception, with the ten-platter **Shawscope Volume Four** (UPC#760137187066, $200), except that it might have been more appropriate of Arrow to have released the set for Halloween instead of Christmas. All of the films have fantasy or science-fiction elements, and most are horror features, with gobs of gore and blood, and a healthy amount of nudity, as well, albeit sprinkled with a few family films. The perfect gift, then, for Dad and the kids, and Mom if she's game, provided you keep the platters straight once you open the set. Better keep it away from Grandma, though. The films that do not appear by themselves on a platter are thematically paired, so it is easy enough to make sure Junior has the movie with the cute monsters and not the one where a poison spell causes a naked woman's stomach to burst open and worms come pouring out. Just sayin'.

There are sixteen films spread across the first nine platters, and a few special features on the tenth platter. As with the previous collections, the films are accompanied by a lovely booklet that provides copious details about each film, including itemizations of the music sources for the scores of most features. All of the films are letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1, except where noted (some of the films do not technically conform to the set's title in that regard) and all are monophonic with Mandarin audio tracks (and other tracks, as noted). All have optional English subtitles. The sound is consistently strong. The color transfers are also consistently top notch. The caveat is that the production environments can vary, so that a movie made in a Shaw soundstage can look exquisite (provided the camera lenses are cooperating), while a film shot on the streets in Malaysia may have a somewhat rougher appearance. Still, it is clear from beginning to end that the film transfers are meticulous, and the quality of the image and the sound often adds to the program's appeal. Viewers should also be aware that the humane treatment of animals during the making of the films was not a priority for the filmmakers.

The first platter features an impressively budgeted 1975 ripoff of the Japanese Ultraman films, *Super Infra-Man* (listed elsewhere in the set as *Super Inframan*), which may be silly as all get out but is a glorious showcase for both production design and the stuntman profession. Wishing to conquer the Earth, a whip-wielding evil blonde sorceress with a leafy skirt and golden brassiere employs her 'Ice Age' monsters (guys in fanciful rubber and metal suits) to attack a research complex where a scientist is putting the finishing touches on the multi-weaponed and indestructible 'Inframan' suit. The film is sort of like having nightmares after falling asleep in a toy store, but it will delight children and charm anyone who is not offended by absurdity. The first monster to attack is a green plant-like being whose vines pierce the concrete walls of the complex. If any part of it is severed, it simply grows back the missing extension. The complex has what amounts to an army of defenders, and that is the true excitement of the sequence, because it is never just one poor guy getting thrown around by one limb. Within a single shot, there are multiple limbs and dozens of stuntmen getting tossed every which way all at once, while the glowing lights of control panels blink with an array of colors that rival Las Vegas. And the entire 91-minute feature is one such contretemps after another. There is a frightening sequence where a monster bursts into a woman's apartment in the dark, a marvelous battle between a walking lobster bug guy with three green eyes and hapless good guys on motorcycles, and there is the central hero, played by Danny Lee, in his red vinyl suit with gizmos that shoot out animated colored beams, always showing up late, but then saving the day. In the sorceress's lair, there is one other bikini-clad woman, a bunch of guards in skeleton costumes, and the elaborately tacky monsters, all of which serve to bring the center of focus back onto the two women for anyone who still has adolescence lodged somewhere in their vision processing centers. Directed by Shan Hua, the film was a flop when it was first released, in part because it was only released in Mandarin in a city where all of the kids spoke Cantonese, but once it arrived on TV with its Cantonese track, which is also available on the presentation, along with an English track for your kids, it became an enduring classic.

A mix of redressed standing sets (if you watch enough Shaw Bros. films, they will be readily recognizable) and outdoor locations, the colors are bright and smooth, presenting one delightful chromatic treat after another.

There are five trailers, five TV commercials, two radio commercials, an enjoyable 13-minute overview of how the film was influenced by other Asian fantasy shows and a good 25-minute interview with costar Bruce Le (which also contains some nice behind-the-scenes photos), talking about his career, making the movie and the nature of the Asian action film business today.

Hong Kong film expert Frank Djeng and martial arts expert Erik Ko provide a commentary track, reminiscing a lot about the film ("The only Shaw Bros. film I could see as a kid.") and the shows it was imitating, while also talking a bit about the cast and the filmmakers, and how the whole Asian Ultraman craze ran into trouble when kids started imitating some of the stunts.

A 1976 American release of the film in English, titled *Infra-Man*, is also available in the supplement. It has the same letterboxing, a similar nice-looking picture transfer and optional subtitles. The sound is in 5.1-channel DTS and while the mix is cheap and rather inept, it is still marvelous, bringing a full dimensional presence to much of the movie and enhancing both the bass delivery and the sound effects. There is a new musical score, as well, and the film has had some very inconsequential snips, to bring the running time down to 90 minutes.

In contrast to *Super Infra-Man*, the first film on the second platter, *Oily Maniac*, from 1976, is loaded with topless nudity and rapes, although it is still about a guy in rubber costume, who wreaks vengeance upon villains when his ire gets raised. A victim of polio in his youth, the crippled hero works in the office of a slimy lawyer when his uncle, about to be executed, passes him a secret incantation that can turn him into an impervious glob of tar and oil. He follows the instructions and the police are subsequently baffled by the gruesome crimes with nothing but oil stains for clues. Shot in Malaysia, the 91-minute film's manner of presentation is also the opposite of the controlled environments in *Infra-Man*, but directed by Meng-Hua Ho, the ragtag feel of the setting and staging are appropriately matched with the dark globular protagonist, who looks and acts a lot more like one of the monster villains in *Infra-Man* than that film's upholstery clad hero (although he is also played by Lee). In any case, the story's focus on rape revenge, assault and just sex in general turns it into a giddy grownup romp, with plenty of nudity and violence to offset the wacky special effects (the hero turns into an oil slick to get around) and general inanity.

Cult film expert Ian Jane provides an earnest commentary track, reeling off the career credits for most of the cast and crew, talking about the history of Shaw Bros. and specifically their ventures in Malaysia and Southeast Asia, deconstructing the musical score and its sources (including Ennio Morricone, Bruno Nicolai and, most flagrantly, **Jaws**), while also going into a complete summary of the history and use coconut oil and of the roles of women in Asian films (which became more exploitative when censorship relaxed), and digresses into an entire analysis of **Come Drink with Me** (Apr 22). Hence, he only touches on what is actually happening in the movie now and then. Nevertheless, he does point out that the film is based upon a popular urban legend, citing examples of the Malaysian 'Oily Man' ('orang minyak') myth, including quotations from 'witnesses,' and also describes other oily man movies and how the other manifestations of the character were depicted. "The movie stays pretty accurate with the whole glowing eyes idea that is featured in the myth and the alternate films based on it, but yeah, it definitely plays fast and loose with some of the details."

When he does address the film's artistic attributes, he is enthusiastic, but honest. "As to the effects used to created the 'Oily Maniac,' it's pretty obvious that it's just a guy in a suit, possibly made of rubber or foam latex. This isn't always convincing in getting us to believe that he's made of oil, as he doesn't really look like he's covered in liquids so much as he's just sort of lumpy."

The first two films in **Volume Four** are fun but of dubious worth. The second film on the second platter, however, Hsueh-Li Pao's 1977 *Battle Wizard*, is less ambiguously engaging. It is a period costume adventure, and it does have supernatural elements, with rays coming out of peoples hands, monsters and a dude whose legs have been replaced by long metal bird's feet that he can telescope at will. Only the gorilla is disappointing. Anyway, what makes the 80-minute film so legitimately entertaining is the romantic melodramatic generational narrative, in which the actions of a father will bring heartache later to his son. The hero, played by Lee, is a scholar who is uninterested in fighting but understands that he must acquire skills, so he sets off to do so in an intellectual manner, and only stumbles into acquiring powers in spite of himself. The females who beat up every guy they come across are so charmed by his naiveté that they don't beat him up, and love blossoms when they are attacked. The stars, including Tanny Tien Ni and Chen-Che Lin, are very appealing, and unlike the first two movies, the film is as interested in the personalities of the characters as it is in their skills and powers. Meanwhile, the fantasy components give the movie a freshness that a plain martial arts feature could not muster. It is exhilarating.

An English audio track is included. Asian film expert Jonathan Clements provides an exceptionally good, entertaining commentary track, embracing the film while at the same time delving into the history of the very long novel, *Demi-Gods and Semi-Devils* by Louis Cha, upon which it is based (it took just a small part of the novel's first section—there have been multiple movies and long form TV shows that have adapted other parts of it), but also going over the actual history that the novel is based upon, as well as a history of Chinese cinema itself, since it is very well worth noting that the earliest Chinese silent films used the same sort of special effects—drawing rays on the image—that this film and many others in the collection utilize. He also talks about the cast and crew, but he is never far away from what is happening on the screen, such as when the hero, who doesn't have his powers yet, does have a magic frog in a box in his pocket, which he releases to thwart a bad guy: "We do have a poison frog, which will apparently leap out of its box and randomly attack people in a frankly Pythonesque fashion. Actually, I suspect it's a toad, because toads are creatures with a long form in Chinese traditional medicine. Basically, there's about a hundred and fifty types of toads that excrete a kind of liquid called, 'bufotoxin,' which is a mild hallucinogenic, and you'd be forgiven for thinking that whoever wrote this film was already taking some."

The third platter presents a film and its sequel, the 1975 *Black Magic* and the 1976 *Black Magic Part 2*, both directed by Ho. The first film was shot (and is set) in Kuala Lumpur while the second was shot (and is set) in Singapore. The films share cast members, including Lung Ti, Lily Li and Ni, but they have different roles and are part of different narratives, although the two features are a worthy pair because the spells and cringy potions, which involve insects, worms and the blood of the victims, are the same in both films, and both films have the same giddy blend of horror, sex, nudity and lactation, mother's milk being

another key ingredient in some of the potions. *Part 2* clearly has a larger budget and is invigorated with more action scenes (although there is a rear projection fight aboard a skytram that doesn't work all that well), thus sustaining a worthy carryover from the first film, which is limited more to the conflicts between the characters and establishing the basic premise. In both, it is the dynamic between the realistic contextual details and the horror fantasies that set the films apart from their predecessors. Both films have an alternate English language track.

In *Black Magic*, a rich and attractive widow arranges for a love potion from an evil wizard because a young construction engineer keeps turning down her advances and is about to be married. The potion kicks in on the wedding night, and the jilted bride must obtain the services of a 'good' wizard. Meanwhile, the evil wizard has developed the hots for the widow himself. Running 98 minutes, the film has some modest special effects in its final showdown, but is relatively low key, banking on the sex and icky potions to keep viewers involved.

Asian films expert James Mudge speaks rapidly on his commentary track, trying to squeeze everything he has to say into his allotted time. In addition to talking about the cast and the crew, the locations and the film's production history, he has a lot to say about the depiction of 'magic,' such as how the focus on the details of the spells lends authority to their depiction. He also talks about the diametric between modern Hong Kong and (at the time) the backward nature of the Chinese homeland (which is evoked in the film by Malaysia). "Mainland China was seen as distinctly rural compared to the urban Hong Kong. I think *Black Magic* does gets a lot of its unease from this pitching of the new Hong Kong against the sinister rural and outdated dark beliefs and ways."

In *Black Magic 2*, a pair of doctors are investigating the possibility that there are occult causes behind the odd cases appearing at the hospital (worms coming out of a patient's back amid ooze, and so on). Still disbelieving, they plot to have one doctor ask a corrupt wizard to make a love potion for the other doctor's wife. It works all too well. Running 93 minutes, the film improves upon the pace of the first movie, as it must, and has a more elaborately pyrotechnic finale. Lieh Lo is especially good as the wizard, adding to the film's entertainment and almost making you wish that he would get away with it.

A 2-minute Americanized credit sequence, calling the film, *Revenge of the Zombies*, is included, and cult film expert Samm Deighan supplies a great commentary for the feature, providing a comprehensive portrait of the careers of the cast and the crew, while also evaluating the narrative and examining how groundbreaking both films were. "There are some mildly campy elements to *Black Magic* and *Black Magic 2* that I think are part of what make the films so much fun, and they really lean into this sense that no one is expecting realism here. Instead, we're going so far beyond the grounded, rational world that it often leans into this kind of surrealism, this kind of nightmare world that is also just such a staple of these black magic, supernatural horror films, period. This is such a great example of why these innovations created entire subgenres that continue to thrive decades later."

We can say absolutely nothing about the plot of the first movie on the fourth platter, the 1980 *Hex*, directed by Chih-Hung Kuei, because it begins its premise with a popular thriller narrative that will be immediately recognizable if you remember the opening sentence of this paragraph as you start to watch the film. Nevertheless, the clever 97-minute feature does come up with an inspired fresh twist to the story for its second half, and has enough of an exotic setting and appealing cast to be fully worthwhile. Meanwhile, there is abundant nudity and plenty of frights. Most of the action takes place in a single, but impressively designed set, a mansion that has seen better days. Ni, Yong Wang and Sze-Kai Chan star. Whoops, we've already said too much. There is an alternate Cantonese audio track, and no special features. Arrow doesn't want to spoil the surprises, either.

Melvin Wong plays a Hong Kong cop researching the brutal murder of a child in the 1981 *Bewitched*, also directed by Kuei. He ends up traveling to Thailand for a while and interviewing a priest who agrees to help him stop the wizard responsible for placing a curse on the killer. The wizard learns of the cop's identity, however, and when the cop returns to Hong Kong, he is beset by illnesses and other problems. That is a bare outline of only one part of the 108-minute feature, which also has a lengthy flashback to explain how the killer came to be cursed, and a quantum entanglement battle between the priest and the wizard. While the film not only begins as a dry procedural, but tends to advance in that matter as well, there is enough topless nudity, gooey special effects, and other police action to hold a viewer's attention throughout, and the film's moral, which appears in text at the very end, is worth noting: "Evil cannot prevail over good. The God of Justice will destroy you if you harm people using witchcraft. At the same time, this story warns men not to fool around with women. You might get bewitched." The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1, and there is an alternate Cantonese audio track.

Mudge provides another breathless commentary, going over the careers of the cast members and analyzing the meanings of the narrative and the nature of witchcraft films. "The way that [Kuei] frames these scenes makes them feel almost like they're from martial arts films, like when you see certain moves being demonstrated and used. And sure, actually, if you take the coming magic battles into account, there's an argument in a film like *Bewitched*, it does kind of fall in a kind of martial arts cinematic narrative framework and the way it revolves around set pieces, action set pieces. And the way that these films, as well, they often have revenge plots, with older teacher and master-type figures and require that a protagonist undergoes some kind of knowledge or skill gaining in order for him to succeed, and you can see the spells as kung fu moves if you like, though you know, of course, that partially comes from my perspective as a martial arts fan as well as a horror fan, and from the fact that we do usually associate the Shaws with those kinds of films and those kinds of narrative structures."

The opening film on the fifth platter is a 1980 slapstick comedy, *Hex vs. Witchcraft*, which is both amusing and tiresome from one scene to the next. Directed by Kuei, a sad sack with gambling debts, played by James Yi Lui, is offered a fortune if he will marry a ghost. He agrees, and they gradually work out their relationship together. Sometimes, she takes possession of the cute stewardess in an upstairs apartment so the two can have sex together, but other times, she just uses the cleaning lady, or a random guy. In the finale, they go to a gambling house to refresh their household finances. Running 101 minutes, some moments are truly inspired and pull off a pleasing mix of performance and wit, and there are a few meta gags where the performers speak straight to the viewer, but often the humor does not translate past cultural barriers, and whether the activity and comedy is enough overall to please a viewer will be up to individual tastes. Also featured is a Cantonese audio track and an amusing minute-long voiceover introduction that summarizes its moral lesson and was intended for inclusion near the beginning of the movie.

There is a nice surprise at the opening of Kuei's 1982 *Hex after Hex* that we can fortunately keep a secret while explaining that the film is another slapstick comedy, slightly slicker than the other one on the platter, with a better ratio of universal humor to local cultural humor. A dimwitted bodybuilder played by Meng Lo attracts a young lady with magical powers (a prominent one being the ability to the make clothing vanish). Not only is a nasty real estate developer evicting everyone from their apartment building, but when the bodybuilder is fired from his job as the developer's chauffeur, she gets a job as the developer's secretary in order to make his life a rather literal living hell. There are some advanced slapstick stunts and a bit of martial arts fighting, in addition to plenty of other special effects. Running 106 minutes, the film is a bit episodic and some viewers will still lose their patience with it, but if your standards are lowered enough, it can be a fun program. There are also a handful of cute meta Shaw Bros. gags. Letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1, while the cinematography is hazy at times, the transfer is very good and the sound has a near stereophonic presence. A Cantonese audio track is also featured.

It is a great relief, after all of the defecation jokes and bad breath jokes and so on, to go back to a classic wuxia feature, and the first film on the sixth platter, the 1980 *Bat without Wings*, fills the bill perfectly. Directed by Yuen Chor, the plot is complicated, with all sorts of characters deceiving one another, but the soundstage settings are gorgeous, the costumes are beautiful and the fight choreography is great fun. There really isn't anything more than a reference or two to the supernatural in the film, but there are fantastical moments galore as the heroes and villains defy gravity and the other laws of physics during their duels. The film begins with a young female warrior being lured into a trap. Her father, her brother, and the hero she thought she was meeting then spend the rest of the film trying to find out what happened to her and why. With its many complications, the film will invite multiple viewings to sort out who is really who—it isn't really much of a spoiler to reveal that two characters, both dressed in KISS-style makeup, call themselves by the titular name—while the many familiar Shaw Bros. standing sets, devious booby traps, and constant swordplay make the 95-minute program continually entertaining.

Deighan provides a commentary track, focusing on not just *Bat without Wings*, but its aspects of popular trends in films, and the arc Shaw Bros. took not only to get there, but where the exploitation components of the film led afterward. She also goes into the careers of the cast and the director, and the details of the narrative ("The letter asks her to go to this abandoned temple, which, if you've ever seen a movie remotely in or adjacent to the horror genre, you know that a letter asking someone to go to an isolated abandoned place is pretty much always bad news.") and its structure ("This is a true ensemble film with a lot of characters who all have their own little subplots and character motivations that we need to take the time to reveal and learn about, but it's unusual in comparison to the more traditional wuxia films from the late Sixties and even early Seventies, where almost the entire narrative focus is put on the hero or a team or small group of heroes working together.").

Far and away the best film in the set, Hua's 1981 *The Bloody Parrot* is a supernatural wuxia mystery with plenty of gore and nudity, which pretty much checks every box so far as we are concerned. The gore and ooze are wonderful, too. In effect, taking its title into consideration, it is a kung fu giallo. Unless you have an aversion to snakes—because there are quite a few of them in the finale—the film is also a great deal of fun. To cite just one of the movie's many highpoints—the heroine must find her way out of a mirrored labyrinth, so she starts taking off her clothing and draping it on the mirrors, leading to one marvelous shot where there is more than a dozen images of her naked body spanning the screen. There is also a demonic parrot that apparently grants wishes. The film is ostensibly about a jewel robbery, as several groups of investigators are searching for the jewels, although so much begins to happen, including the murders of practically anyone even remotely connected to the case, that you pretty much forget about the jewels until they suddenly show up again. Running just 97 minutes, there seems to be enough plot and activity for a movie three times as long. It eventually settles on the adventures of one investigator,

who partners with a companion. When the companion is killed, he lugs the companion's coffin around with him—he has promised to bury the man in the town of his birth—until the coffin is opened one night and a zombie leaps out. The film's swordfights are exceptionally good, and amid the investigations into poisonings and other killings (including plenty of gooey autopsies), there is thoughtful conversation about life, death and fate. It is the structure of the narrative as a mystery thriller that really makes the movie's other component feel consistently vital and intriguing, and the solution is fully satisfying, right down to the parrot.

The transfer, as usual, is meticulous. The film, on the other hand, is at times woefully out of focus and hazy, while at other times it is finely detailed and slick. Again, the sound is quite strong.

Deighan provides another enthusiastic commentary, discussing the cast and crew, doing her best to explain the complex narrative, and admiring the film's gorgeous production designs. She also goes over once again the changes that were happening in the market and with Shaw Bros. "It also exists in this really interesting transitional point for Shaw Bros. where you have all of these different genre elements and influences coming together."

A messy but still very enjoyable 1982 comedy opening the seventh platter, *The Fake Ghost Catchers*, directed by Kar-Wing Lau, stars Ho Hsiao, the Simon Pegg-like Chin-Pang Cheung and the great Alexander Fu Sheng as hapless exorcists trying to help a murdered bride. Running 103 minutes, the film leaps ahead at times as if in some point in its creation plot paths were cut short or dropped altogether, but the story still manages to get from its beginning to its middle and then to its end (although one supposedly major character, talked about throughout the film, like Godot, never appears) while sustaining a general atmosphere of action and fun. The humor is not as base as it is in some of the other comedies in the set, relying on acrobatic slapstick and character ineptness for most of its gags, while the fight scenes are energetically staged and the classically executed supernatural sequences are witty and rousing. A Cantonese audio track is also featured.

It is a shame there is no English audio track to Tak-Cheung Tang's 1983 *Demon of the Lute*, because the magic and martial arts adventure is a family film. A thief and his child are robbing a wealthy man's house when attackers arrive and kill everyone inside, searching for something. The pair hide and get away, and obviously, although they don't realize it, they've got the object the attackers wanted. The kid has some very cute martial arts skills of his own, which come in handy when they meet the other heroes, including a young woman who has been sent on a quest to gather objects that can destroy an otherwise impervious lute, which causes death to anyone who hears it played, and a young man who has been living in a cave and gaining skills by practicing the stances painted on the cave walls. There are a couple of other heroes, too, and a number of fanciful villains wearing various getups. Running 107 minutes, the film spends much of its time getting the characters together and involving them in various preliminary matches before proceeding to the main event. Yes, it is a little silly, but it is never tiresome. As much as we enjoyed the film now, however, we would have enjoyed it a great deal more in our adolescence. One of the music's themes often verges on *Love Me Tender*, which is sweet at first, but can get irritating after a while.

A Cantonese audio track is also featured. Djeng provide another commentary track, taking note of the film's combining of components for adults and kids, going over the source of the story, discussing the trends that brought the film to the screen and going over the careers of the cast and the crew. He also notes the music's similarity to *Love Me Tender*, and he talks about the dangers of using dry ice on a set (and the even greater dangers of using fire and smoke).

An excellent black magic thriller on the eighth platter, the 1983 *Seeding of a Ghost*, was directed by Richard Kuen Yeung. A cab driver goes to a wizard (whom he originally met as a late night fare) seeking revenge for the rape and murder of his wife, except that he identifies the wrong killer. No matter. Once the wife's spirit gets cooking, she punishes everyone involved. Running 90 minutes, what makes the film so good is its straightforward plotting. It begins as a romantic melodrama, but just starts getting wilder and wilder, until it concludes at a cocktail party from Hell, where the guests are treated to a combination of **Alien**, **The Thing** and something far worse. Indeed, it is the tight narrative vector itself that reinforces the film's excitements, accelerating both momentum and gore as it indelibly advances. The two *Black Magic* films were great, but this movie goes right to heart of the genre's appeal—sex, guts and fantasy—with a direct metaphorical link between the over-the-top, grotesque effects and the moral corruption of the characters.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1, and there is an alternate Cantonese audio track. Mudge supplies another speedy commentary, doing his best to summarize the history of Hong Kong horror films while also talking about the cast and crew, and the entire Hong Kong horror scene. "I'm a Category Three [the strongest Hong Kong rating] fan, which is possibly something I maybe shouldn't admit or put on this recording. While those films are fun if you like more extreme cinema, to be honest they are for the most part not very well made at all. They are very quite cheap, they are quite quick productions. While *Seeding of a Ghost* looks quite low budget, to be honest, in comparison to some of the other Shaw horrors, I will say *Seeding* is genuinely very well made, and Yeung Kuen does a great job as a director. He lifts the film up several notches. It's hard to see past the graphic content at times, and the madness of it all, but there are some scenes which are really very well done. There's some great atmosphere, as well. I'm not suggesting that *Seeding* is some hidden, cinematic masterpiece, but I think there's clearly a lot more effort put in by Yeung Kuen than you quite often got in these kind of films."

All of the films contain fantasy imagery, if not actual fantasy, but Hua's 1983 *Portrait in Crystal* is the most dreamlike film in the set. One reason for this is the 83-minute running time. The film's narrative has been trimmed down to its core essentials—even the ending is sudden—so that the story advances from one situation to the next with the slimmest of logic or no logic whatsoever, and the viewer is left to absorb every scene and every burst of action practically without context. The hero, played by Jason Piao Pai, is a sculptor who has made a crystal figurine that is stolen. A pair of important officials are killed, apparently by the crystal come to life, and the sculptor is blamed for the deaths, so one step ahead of the law, he and his chubby companion set off to retrieve the statuette and uncover the truth. The film has nearly constant action and much of it is fantastical, so that if you accept each sequence for the excitements and imagination it has to offer, and otherwise allow the film to carry forward (eventually, the primary mysteries are explained), it becomes a rousing psychedelic adventure where you never know what is going to happen next. The fights are fairly basic, but fast and intense, and there always seems to be something popping up somewhere, while gore and nudity, including a rather serious bondage scene, provide a worthy counterpoint to the spectral challenges the heroes face in their journey. There is an alternate Cantonese audio track.

The last movie in the set is by itself on the ninth platter, *Twinkle Twinkle Little Star*, an eclectic 1983 science-fiction comedy directed by Alex Cheung. The film parodies a number of different movies, including **The Seven Year Itch** and **Taxi Driver**, but the two receiving the most attention are **Close Encounters of the Third Kind** and **The Empire Strikes Back**. A young woman is apparently abducted from a park at night by a flying saucer, and then returned. When a detective finds proof of the abduction, she becomes famous and wealthy, and every other woman in the city goes to the park in hopes of being abducted also. The detective and his partner also go, in drag, and the detective is abducted as well, leading to a reasonably amusing lightsaber battle aboard the ship between the detective and a Darth Vader-looking figure. When the detective's lightsaber is cut in half, he turns it into light nunchucks, which work great until he accidentally parks one in his armpit while showing off. Ouch. He needn't worry, however, since when it looks like all is lost and he himself is about to be cut in half, he takes off his clothing to accept his fate and the Vader lightsaber goes limp. Running 97 minutes, the film is all over the place—there are even a couple of Bollywood-style musical numbers, except that nobody in the film can dance; there is also a pie fight—with numerous side characters and gags, some of which are amusing and some of which will try a viewer's patience. It is not the strongest film in the collection by any means, but the budget and production designs are impressive, as are some of the stunts (including an elaborate and impress car crash sequence), and it is a decent example of what Shaw Bros. was capable of when the company was not concentrating on wuxia intrigues.

The Mandarin version of the film runs 97 minutes. Also featured is a 96-minute Cantonese version, where lampoons of Chinese leaders have been trimmed, although another Cantonese version is also offered that runs the full 97 minutes, with the trimmed sequences in Mandarin.

This was the only film in the entire set that had a significant flaw on its image, although it is almost invisible, a very thin blue line and squiggle that appears on the picture for a little bit in one scene. In a very good 25-minute analysis of Cheung's career and the film, it is suggested that the enormous saucer hovering above and sucking up humans can be seen as the looming takeover of Hong Kong by Red China. "The film does use scifi as a way to think about the idea that Hong Kong had no agency." Also featured are two trailers and an 34-minute interview with the personable Cheung, talking about how he got into films, the sources for his movies and the joy he feels about life and filmmaking.

Djeng provides the commentary, enthusiastically explaining all of the cultural jokes and references ("You also notice that the sofa chair that his dad is sitting [on] there is also modeled after the sofa chair that mainland Chinese leaders would sit [on]."), providing a reasonably thorough breakdown of the film's production and intent, and pointing out the film's many different allusions to other movies, from **Alien** to **The Graduate**.

The tenth platter holds twenty-two trailers; a TV commercial; a 13-minute black-and-white French news report about Shaw Bros. that has lots of great behind-the-scenes footage (from *The Lady Hermit*, which appeared in **Shawscope Volume Three**; and including shots of how the 'clangs' of the swords are achieved); a rewarding 14-minute profile of Ho and how his filmmaking style in *Super Infra-Man* exemplifies the innovations he brought to many of the movies he made for Shaw Bros.; a general 22-minute appreciation of *Super Infra-Man* and another really nice 22-minute piece by Kim Newman talking not just about *Super Infra-Man*, but about superhero movies throughout the world, the history of the Ultraman series in Japan, how it all came to be wrapped into *Infra-Man*, "It takes elements from all these earlier things, and throws them together in, I would say, a wholly wonderful, utterly naïve, charming take on this [group]. It is an absolute success at what it wants to be." (he also points out that the stuntmen, practiced in actual martial arts, make the fight scenes a little better than those in the films it is imitating); an 18-minute summary and appreciation of *Battle Wizard*; a rewarding 13-minute analysis of *Bat without Wings* and Chor's artistry ("Chor Yuen used colored gels, fog machines and ornate set designs not just for beauty, but to evoke emotional disorientation. The sets are metaphors, mazes for the mind as much as spaces for

the body. Spatial composition is meticulous. Characters emerge from behind screens, stand framed in doorways. He uses architecture to suggest entrapment or betrayal. Space doesn't just hold action. It tells the story."); and two appreciations and breakdowns of *Demon of the Lute* running a total of 46 minutes.

## The rise of Sammo Hung

A three-platter Blu-ray set from Eureka! Entertainment, **Triple Threat: Three Films With Sammo Hung** (UPC#760137199595, $75), examines the portly (but highly athletic) star's rise in prominence from the Seventies to the Nineties. All of the films are supported by optional English subtitles and come with alternate English language tracks and trailers.

Hung has a secondary role (as one of the bad guys) and oversaw the fight sequences in the 1974 *The Manchu Boxer*, directed by Wu Ma. Piao Ho stars as a wanderer who has sworn off fighting but kills a man when he is trying to defend himself, and then seeks out the man's family to provide restitution. A fighting tournament is being held in the family's town and villains are plotting to manipulate it as a stepping stone to power, a plan upset by the hero's presence, despite his reluctance to become involved. The characters have early Twentieth Century attire, but there is no technology in evidence (the car you can see in the background for three frames during one of the fights doesn't count). The fights are direct and fierce, and there is some brief nudity in a rape scene. Running 87 minutes, the film is fairly basic but wholly satisfying as a combination of action and drama.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1. The picture transfer is inconsistent. Fleshtones are bland and the image wavers between being adequate and seeming vaguely inadequate. The monophonic sound is also somewhat weak, although it remains coherent. The film is in Manchurian. Much of the music has been lifted from Ennio Morricone.

Hong Kong film experts Frank Djeng and Michael Worth supply a passable commentary track, talking about the cast and crew, and the early part of Hung's career, while also sharing lots of gossip about Hong Kong filmmaking, reacting to the narrative and pointing out various aspects of the production. "You can see the harsh lighting with the shadows, and this is not something that like today's standards you would call good cinematography or lighting, but back then, that's just the way they had to do it. They just survived."

A great example of an enjoyable film that one is unlikely to obtain unless it is part of a larger set, the 1988 *Paper Marriage*, which appears on the same platter, stars Hung and Maggie Cheung, as a couple who get married so that she can get a green card and only start to fall in love afterwards. He needs the money she is offering because of debts to loan sharks, but then her own plans are upended and they are stuck together with shared money problems. There are eventually martial arts sequences—a couple of boxing matches, a mud wrestling fight and an elaborate fight and chase with mobsters at the Edmonton Mall in Alberta (subbing for the U.S.)—but the 92-minute film is mostly a mix of slapstick and romance that is carried by the personalities of the two stars. Directed by Alfred Cheung (who has a supporting role), it may be a minor and relatively inconsequential film, but it is consistently charming. It is also worth noting that Hung's performance is as engaging as his fighting skills, adding to the movie's appeal significantly.

Letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1, the picture quality looks fine. The film is in Cantonese and comes with a nice 22-minute interview with Cheung, talking about his life and career, sharing many details about making the film, discussing his second job as an actor ("I look like Woody Allen, a Hong Kong Woody Allen.") and mentioning how much better the craft services were in Canada.

Asian film enthusiasts Arne Venema and Dominie Ting provide a breezy commentary track, talking about the cast and the crew, and Hung's circle of friends and filmmakers, while also going over the Canadian locations trying halfheartedly to pretend to be Los Angeles, and pointing out various details in the fight scenes, such as when Hung gets kicked by an attacker. "I think that was a hand with a shoe on it. You can see the shoe flop back a little bit."

A glossy 1990 Cantonese feature set in the early Thirties, *Shanghai Shanghai*, appearing on the second platter, would make a fine double bill with Jackie Chan's **Miracles** (Nov 00). Biao Yuen stars and Hung is a principal villain, the triad 'Godfather' who steals money intended for revolutionaries from another gangster at a fancy dancing club in the film's rousing opening sequence. Yuen is the hero, the younger brother of a British military officer played by George Lam who comes to the city to earn money, is innocently embroiled in the opening robbery and eventually put in charge of the club. Sandy Lam is a performing acrobat who falls for him, while both Anita Mui and Tien Niu have connections to the revolutionaries and are in love with the older brother. There is a terrific sequence where Yuen and Mui pretend to be dancing on the dance floor while they are actually fighting one another, and the grand shootout at the end is the best spectacle of all, if you are comfortable with the idea of that many British soldiers who are just following orders are gunned down by the heroes. There is also an element of humor incorporated, with Lam's character inventing and testing personal flying machines, which then figure into the final action sequence. Running 88 minutes, the film, directed by Teddy Robin, comes close to achieving a compelling mix of action, politics, camaraderie and romance—the performances are all quite good and Hung's acting is again as captivating as his fighting—and while it never completely ties the pieces together, it is consistently entertaining and concludes before any momentum is lost.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1. Fleshtones are rich, hues are bright and slick, and the image is sharp. It looks gorgeous. The monophonic sound has a near-stereo presence. Djeng is prompted by film expert F.J. DeSanto on the commentary track, talking about the cast, the staging, the period setting, the actors' voices ("Probably one reason why [Hung is] dubbed by someone else is because he's playing a villain, which is rather unusual, right? So, he probably thought, 'I shouldn't have my regular guy dub me in this film.' Otherwise, it would be weird, because then people would think that this is a comedic character with the same voice.") and the disappearance of Hung's character at the end without resolving his status. Djeng also translates words and phrases, and explains other references, and they point out the popularity of the Shanghai setting, particularly as the specter of the Chinese takeover was looming.

The last platter contains longer 'Extended International Cut' versions of both *Manchu Boxer* and *Shanghai Shanghai*. Both have optional English subtitles. On both films, the image and sound quality is the same as on the original releases.

The longer *Manchu Boxer* runs 93 minutes and includes more explicit nudity during the rape sequences as well as lengthier dramatic sequences that were apparently just trimmed for pacing on the Hong Kong cut, along with an extra kick in the groin here and there during the fight scenes. Hence, the longer version is preferable.

The longer *Shanghai Shanghai* also runs 93 minutes. A couple of major scenes are rearranged, and other scenes have been streamlined and embellished. There are also some slightly bloodier shots added, but on the whole, it feels more like the entire film was re-thought, and while it does not entirely solve the film's minor drawbacks, it lessens them slightly.

## The education of Abbas Kiarostami

The Criterion Collection's *Eclipse Series* multi-platter DVD releases, highlighting collections of lesser known films from famous directors and films from lesser known directors, ceased appearing in 2018, so it is quite exciting to discover that Criterion has resurrected the series for Blu-ray. Their premiere release is a three-platter BD set, *Eclipse Series 47* **Abbas Kiarostami Early Shorts and Features** (UPC#715515316613, $70), unveiling the beginnings of one of Iran's greatest filmmakers.

Kiarostami started his career in the Seventies working for an organization called Institute for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults, and therefore his first films were either about the adventures of children or were educational documentaries, but seen in chronological order, they also chart his own development in mastering the language and intricacies of cinema. The source material has been nursed as best as possible in all cases, so that while the films remain grainy and mildly worn looking, the color movies have relatively fresh hues and the black-and-white films are reasonably sharp. All of the films have serviceable monophonic audio tracks, and all are in Farsi, with optional English subtitles.

Kiarostami was subsequently responsible for more than a half dozen recognized cinematic classics. Our favorite Kiarostami film is none of those, however, but rather a wonderful 1987 film he made about a child trying to bring homework to a classmate, *Where Is the Friend's House?*, released on Blu-ray as part of Criterion's **The Koker Trilogy** set (Sep 20). The first film in **Shorts and Features**, a squared full screen black-and-white piece from 1970 running 12 minutes, *Bread and Alley*, is similar in its design, about a child walking home from school and hesitating about walking down an alley because a dog is there. The beauty of the film anticipates the joys of *Friend's House*, conveying, without dialog or translation, the clarity of what the child is thinking every moment he is on the screen. And for that matter, what the dog is thinking, as well. The film opens with an instrumental version of *Ob-La-Di, Ob-La-Da*, which Kiarostami likely did not secure the rights to at the time, but it is fortunate that someone has since decided to, since it is an intricate part of the film's delights.

The 16-minute black-and-white squared full screen *Breaktime* from 1972 is a less focused but more elaborately staged approach to the same topic. A boy has a bad day at school, and his ill luck continues during his walk home. Kiarostami experiments with different types of visual storytelling, such as using the shadows of images and figures, or playing with the focus on a telephoto lens, and to that end, the film is purposeful, but it does not accomplish the purity of concept and delivery that the first film achieved.

Kiarostami takes everything he learned from those two films and applies it to a 56-minute black-and-white film from 1973, *Experience*, about an adolescent boy doing menial tasks for a photography studio in exchange for sleeping there at night. He has an uneasy relationship with the studio's owner and the photographers barely tolerate him. Dialog is sparse, with Kiarostami essentially uses the camera to watch the boy as he goes about daily routines, and also as the boy tries to catch the eye of a pretty girl who lives down the street. Letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1, the film is a valid upgrade to what Kiarostami was doing before, and although it is more episodic than narrative based, he does effectively compile a portrait of the boy through his actions and choices, while exploring many fascinating details in the boy's world and leading to a devastating ending, even though no actual harm occurs.

Kiarostami's first feature-length film, *The Traveler*, was included in the supplement of Criterion's release of Kiarostami's **Close-Up** (Sep 20). Running 74 minutes, the 1974 production is about a wayward boy hustling money from his friends and local merchants, and stealing from his parents, so he

can buy a bus ticket and go to the big city to see a soccer match. Seen in the context of the three previous movies, the film is an impressive distillation of everything that came before it. The narrative is clearly developed—there is a lot more dialog than there was in the previous movies. The camera shifts from tight views of the characters to longer views, not only allowing Kiarostami to 'steal' shots of the kids on the streets, **400 Blows**-style, but sustaining an interest in the action through the exhilarating variation of the shots. And it is also clear, over the course of the movies, that he became very skilled at working with child actors, something that would stand him in very good stead by the time he got to *Friend's House*. As for *The Traveler,* the film is in some ways very disturbing—this kid seems to have no moral values whatsoever—while sustaining a penetrating view of the environment he has been raised in—not only at home, but at his ghastly school and on the dusty streets of his neighborhood—that offer a sympathetic understanding of why he is the way he is, so that you genuinely feel for him and what happens when he arrives at the stadium in Tehran. The squared full screen picture is in black and white.

Kiarostami's first color film is a 6-minute educational short from 1975 entitled *Two Solutions to the Same Problem,* depicting two school boys who first try to solve a conflict by escalating violence with one another, and then approach the same conflict in a more reasoned manner, subsequently asking the viewer which method is the preferable solution. It is a cute effort. The image is in a squared full screen format. Another color educational short from 1975 with the same framing running 5 minutes, *So Can I,* mixes simple animated depictions of animals in motion with live depictions of a child doing the same motions, with a punchline—an airplane is substituted when it comes to imitating a bird at the end. Closing out the platter is a third educational film from 1975, also in the same framing format, running 16 minutes, *The Colors*, which consists primarily of montages working their way through the chromatic spectrum, although there are also digressions, such as a depiction of a boy imagining that he is at the wheel of a slot car that is racing around a track against other, differently colored cars. The film is not only educational but highly stimulating, which then feeds into its educational value, although in this era of anti-firearm sentiment, some viewers may take a dim view of an invigorating sequence where a child appears to fire a gun systematically and bottles holding different colored paints explode.

The second platter opens with a 60-minute color film from 1976, *The Wedding Suit*, deftly continuing the blend of anxiety and suspense that Kiarostami began with *Bread and Alley* and then matured with *The Traveler*. One boy is an apprentice in a tailor's shop, another in the restaurant below and a third in a garment business across the way. A customer wants to pick up a suit that her son will wear to a wedding from the tailor, and the other two boys are pressuring the tailor's apprentice to let them wear the suit the night before it is to be picked up. He lets the responsible boy borrow it, but then the irresponsible boy bullies the other one into letting him have it instead. The irresponsible boy is irritating, which, like *The Traveler,* can be a little off putting (one of the strengths of *Friend's House* is that there was no villain, just the general threat of failure, and time), but the film is a fascinating look at an urban neighborhood niche, with an eye not just for detail, but for how the sociological microcosm functions, and it is while that is happening that you gradually get to know, and ultimately tolerate—and even feel sympathy for—the characters. And when it comes to excitement, the finale is no different than something depicting a secret agent trying to stop a bomb from going off as the seconds tick down. The picture has an aspect ratio of about 1.66:1.

*Tribute to Teachers* is a 17-minute documentary from 1977 comprised primarily of interviews with teachers in classrooms, talking about their profession, its spiritual rewards, and the teachers that inspired them. There is also a metaphor wafting through the piece that compares teaching to gardening. The enthusiasm and almost sacred honor they convey for their profession is palpable, although it might be interesting to see a similar documentary made 50 years later, to look at the changes that have gone on in Iranian society in the interim.

A man is standing by the side of a road hitchhiking in the opening of the 12-minute *Solution No.1* from 1978, a color film in a squared full screen format, and providing any more specifics would spoil the film's discoveries except that, failing to obtain a ride, he begins to jog instead, and the object he was previously carrying takes on a life of its own. The film is cute, but it is primarily an exercise in cinema, capturing specific motions with specific methods while telling a coherent narrative. The mountainous scenery is also impressive.

Opening with a slate marked, 'Take 4,' to underscore its artifice, *First Case, Second Case* begins with a male teacher making an elaborate drawing of the workings of the ear on a blackboard while his male students, jammed into a classroom, sit patiently. Someone in the very back of the class begins drumming beneath a desk, but when the teacher turns his head, the noise stops. The teacher turns back to his drawing and the noise begins again. After warning about the consequences, only to have the noise recur again, the teacher sends a half-dozen of the students in the back out into the hallway and says that unless they identify the perpetrator, they will all have to remain out there for a week. There are cuts to the apparently real parents of the children, from a variety of social strata, each sure that his child was not the one causing the problem, and then two scenarios are presented. In the first, one child breaks down, identifies the guilty party and returns to his seat. In the second, the kids remain outside together for the entire week. After each scenario is presented, there proceeds to be an amazing collection of interviews with authorities from all aspects of Iranian's leadership—education, government, religion, psychology, the arts, and so on—expressing their opinions in each segment as to who was right and who was wrong, a surprising number of them siding with the 'collective' solidarity of the kids. Several accuse the teacher of failing, although only one suggests that the teacher should have prepared the drawing before the class began and no one offers the obvious solution of breaking the boys up and putting them in the front seats of the class rather than immediately banishing them. Nevertheless, running 48 minutes, the 1979 film is outstanding. It offers learned perspectives justifying or condemning the actions of each character, including the suggestion of links the culture of informing propagated in the previous years under dictatorial rule, and it places a fascinating context on the future, as the kids represent the generation that sent Iran into further authoritarian upheaval. One can't help but think that if the class had been co-ed, things might have gone differently. The squared full-screen picture is in color, and you may want to keep your finger on the pause button, as the dialog and identifications of the speakers sometimes flash by too quickly to absorb on the first pass. We also wonder if the film itself would play differently if re-editing were to reverse the two scenarios.

An excellent educational film from 1980 about brushing your teeth, *Toothache*, tells the story of a schoolboy who suffers humiliation (nobody will sit next to him because of his bad breath) and pain because he doesn't brush his teeth regularly. When he goes to the dentist, one works on him while another talks to the camera about how bacteria thrives in the mouth (accompanied by some marvelous animation in which the bacteria is depicted as fat, gluttonous demons gorging themselves on enamel) and how brushing can prevent both the damage and the embarrassment of poor dental hygiene. Running 27 minutes and presented in color in a squared full screen format, it hopefully sparks both fear and resolution in all who watch it, young and old alike.

Perhaps a failure and perhaps not, an ostensible 1981 educational film running 17 minutes, *Orderly or Disorderly*, begins by showing how much smoother and better a school functions when the children follow the rules and boundaries. Each segment is introduced with a slate again, identifying first an orderly activity, such as getting water from a cooler in the courtyard (all of the kids use the same cup, which can make you cringe) or boarding a bus; and then second, on a first come, first serve basis, in which the kids end up destroying the water cooler and practically dislocating their shoulders trying to get into the bus. The lesson is clear, but the Kiarostami moves on to city traffic, and his hopes of depicting anything even approaching order quickly dissolves into chaos, especially at an intersection that does not appear to have a working traffic light. Even the cop who arrives can't stop the cars from going willy-nilly, and it is surprising he didn't capture an accident during the shoot. Presented in often faded colors and a squared full screen format, the film remains interesting throughout (is he surreptitiously lambasting the city's traffic planners?), but only Kiarostami can say whether it ended up being the movie that he had planned to make, which, it is often said, is the fate of many filmmaking endeavors.

A color film presented with an aspect ratio of about 1.66:1 and running 18 minutes, *The Chorus* is about an elderly man who periodically isolates himself by pulling out his hearing aid. The film opens with an impressively staged sequence depicting a horse-drawn cart speeding down tight cobblestone alleys, but it is generally a fairly simple and straightforward piece offering up a small slice of life and perhaps a metaphor of loneliness, with a touching conclusion.

The third platter contains three films. The first, *Fellow Citizen*, is a 1983 documentary depicting a partial day in the life of an officer whose job it is to stop traffic from entering a congestion zone without authorization. It would have been helpful if the 51-minute film had opened with a schematic showing exactly where the man is standing and how the traffic is coming to him instead of just a generalized map that means very little, but not understanding the layout—Kiarostami never provides an establishing shot, either—just brings the focus to the officer and the people trying all day long to hustle him. Kiarostami shoots it with a telephoto lens—which makes the traffic seem even more perilous, especially when the officer tells people to back up—but is able to record the sound quite clearly. The editing varies the camera angles slightly, following the action, as it were, but it is all the same sort of shot of one or two people talking, with other car passengers occasionally seen in the periphery. Because there is no establishing shot, the film is disorienting at first, and can seem alienating, as well, but as the bombardment of mendacity and clueless desperation goes on and on, your sympathy for the poor public employee grows along with an enjoyment of the spectacle of what he has to put up with day in and day out. And it's a sunny day. You can just imagine what it must be like in the rain or the snow. The color film is presented in a squared full screen format.

Kiarostami brings his camera to an elementary school for the 1984 documentary, *First Graders*, which runs 84 minutes. He stays primarily in the outdoor assembly and recess area, and in the office of what we would think of as the 'vice principal,' as a steady stream youngsters enter sheepishly with notes stating that they were fighting, explaining why they arrived late to school and so on. He tends to deal with them all in a predictable manner. The film also has a few diversions—Kiarostami seems particularly interested in watching a young boy on crutches, and even drops everything else to follow him when his father picks him up for an appointment—and some segments are clearly staged, such as when a boy peers into another classroom and you see a reverse angle. Overall, the film, which is in a squared full screen format and in color, has less to offer than many of the other movies in the set, even the shorter ones, and there is less that a viewer can discern about Iranian society, or even the school's culture, from what is depicted. Contrary to what happens in *Orderly or Disorderly*, incidentally, the kids are told clearly at one point not to share their food because

mixing saliva is not healthy.

The final film, *Homework* from 1989, appeared previously as a supplement in **The Koker Trilogy** set, although we admit that we liked the film quite a bit more re-watching it (and knowing what to expect up front) than we did the first time. The squared full screen color image quality is identical to the previous presentation. Running 77 minutes, the film provides a much better look at the Iranian school system the *First Graders* does, as it is comprised of interviews with schoolboys about their homework—what they think of it, what it usually consists of and how they fit it into their schedules—along with a few adult interviews, from parents to representatives of Iran's Education ministry. Even though no young girls are interviewed, the array of boys is pointedly different than the seeming monotony of sameness that haunts *First Graders*, and this may be because it is Kiarostami asking the questions instead of a school official who already knows the answers before he asks. In any case, you get vivid descriptions of the home lives of the kids despite the general inherent reticence of boys that age to say anything more than they absolutely have to, and an excellent portrait of what the country's school system was and was not accomplishing at the time. By then, as well, Kiarostami had fully grasped the power he could achieve with his filmmaking and his often unique blend of reality and fiction, which was a necessary byproduct of working in a political environment where he had to protect or disguise the true purposes of his creations.

## Make your own Trilogy

Four films are presented on four platters in the Arrow Video Blu-ray set, **Akio Jissôji The Buddhist Trilogy** (UPC#760137130789, $65), and it is a good thing, because one of the films in the official trilogy does not belong with the other two, while the fourth movie, kind of an add on, fits with the other two perfectly. All four films are in Japanese with optional English subtitles. Jissôji, as Japanese films expert David Desser explains in a 10-introduction on the first platter, was extensively involved with the creation of the *Ultra-Man* series and helmed many of the original episodes, which is quite the opposite to what he accomplished when he began making films.

Meticulously composed in a squared full screen black-and-white image, Jissôji's 1970 *This Transient Life* is superficially a melodrama about an incestuous relationship between a brother and sister in their twenties, but there is a constant and compelling backdrop of Buddhism and the meanings of existence. The brother is fascinated by statues of Buddha and eventually becomes an apprentice to a sculptor, ingratiating himself in the sculptor's domestic situation, as well. A monk at a lovely, park-like hilltop monastery sees everything the brother is up to and confronts him, only to have his own beliefs placed in jeopardy by the brother's arguments. The brother fails to recognize that humans themselves are simply a construct of conflicting molecular algorithms, but his arguments up to that point are stimulating and even daring. The film's narrative is a sufficient lure to hook the viewer if not on its ideas, then on its blend of images and emotions. There is a wonderful dream sequence right before the end, where the protagonist and his grandmother dig up a large fish at the beach. Running a hefty 143 minutes, the film is visually sensual, whether it is observing the writhing bodies of lovers or the weathered stones in walls and passageways, and it is the contrast between the calm, penetrating visual designs and the ostensibly extreme emotional choices of the characters that sustain a viewer's attention and intrigue.

The image is spotless and finely detailed, compounding a viewer's concentration with every cut. The sound design is as meticulous as the cinematography, and the monophonic sound is clear and precise. The musical score is mostly a handoff between a violin and a harpsichord, and even at its most shrill, it sustains the film's contemplative atmosphere. Desser also deconstructs 88 minutes of scenes from the film, going over the story, Jissôji's filmmaking strategies (including detailed, moment-by-moment breakdowns of the camera movements and framings) and the film's more obscure references to Buddhism and Japanese culture.

Color (with black-and-white sequences) and letterboxing with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1 is not enough to help Jissôji's 1971 *Mandala* seem like anything but sophomoric hogwash. The film lacks any kind tightly executed story, the discipline of which allowed *This Transient Life* to explore philosophies and ideas about art and existence. Instead, there is a vague situation—the leader of an agrarian sex cult likes to spy on people staying in an all-white hotel room with angular walls that make you think it was designed by Dr. Caligari. When the film begins, the man who apparently owns the hotel—or, at least, sells it at the end so he's got cash—is fooling around with a woman while on closed circuit TV the leader and his gang are enjoying the show. The film has no real lovemaking, only naked people grappling one another, and the moans of passion by the heroines are continually belied by strategically placed towelettes that cover the men. On the other hand, the film contains multiple rape scenes. When they are done in their hotel room, the guy and the girl go to the beach, where they are attacked. And it gets more confusing and pointless as it goes along. There are scenes where the group are planting something, scenes where they wear masks and have ritual dances, and conversations about being and nothingness. Perhaps because of the color cinematography, the film lacks the poetic consistency that images in *This Transient Life* created. There are certainly some nice looking shots—both movies seem to have used the same picturesque locations, which Jissôji returns to again during the other films in the set—but they are isolated in *Mandala* and never build to much. Since the film has so much nudity and raping, it will hold the attention of some viewers, but as a work of art, it is a hopeless mess.

The color is generally fresh, although the image is grainy at times and contrasts are inconsistent. The black-and-white shots actually look a lot nicer, although the shifts between the two—often but not always representing the perspective of a particular character—use the change effectively. There is an overbearing pipe organ musical score. Along with a trailer, Desser provides another 81 minutes of analysis and insight, pointedly avoiding a discussion of any of the rape scenes. "When I watch this movie, I feel like filmic time begins to feel like real time." He offers nothing to suggest that the film is anything more than what you see. He does elucidate a few specific details and once in a while points out an especially clever use of the camera or editing, but overall he just reinforces the obviousness that there is nothing there there.

Fortunately, Jissôji's black-and-white 1972 *Poem* follows in the footsteps of *This Transient Life* and not *Mandala*. It is a masterpiece, hypnotic, mysterious and stunning, yet based, as was *This Transient Life*, on a simple and readily understandable domestic drama. A lawyer and his wife live in a large house amid an undeveloped wilderness owned by his father. He works out of his house with an assistant, a maid and a houseboy. The assistant and the maid are a couple, but waiting until the assistant passes his bar exam before they can be married. The houseboy is the son of lawyer's father's maid and is dedicated to serving the family, but he has a mental condition that we would today recognize as some sort of combination of OCD and mild autism. He also helps in the law office, but only works from precisely nine to precisely five, except that at precisely midnight he gets up and walks around the house with a flashlight to make sure all is well. He spends his spare time making rubbings from the stones in a nearby graveyard, and studying the calligraphy.

Letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1, two versions of the film are presented, a *Theatrical Cut* that runs 119 minutes, and an *Extended Cut* that runs 137 minutes. Most of the additional footage occurs during the initial hour, and it is critical, because that is when you get to know the characters. With the extra material, their quirks and tensions become more familiar, so that when the plot turns, some of which involve erotic assignations, begin to upset the equilibrium, the changes are more meaningful, and the conclusion is more devastating. In the meantime, it is the cast, including Saburô Shinoda, Eiko Yanami, Ryô Tamura and Hiroko Sakurai, and their performances, that keep one invested in the narrative. Like the first film, the cinematography is continually striking, with one intriguing composition after another, and not even the mild speckling that is present now and then—particularly on the *Extended Cut*—can spoil the subliminal power that the crisp images carry to the viewer. The musical score is basically repeated renditions of the same recording of Antonio Vivaldi's *The Four Seasons*, but even that stunt works amazingly well, as if *Poem* were the only film ever made that truly deserved to use the piece. In the final act, a new character arrives and pretty much destroys everything. During a drunken conversation, he explains, "We don't need souls. The world itself, or existence itself, is but a dream. It's just a caprice of the inorganic substances that constitute the universe." So long as such caprices include films like *Poem*, existence as it stands is worth dreaming.

Along with a trailer, Dresser supplies another 48 minutes of analysis. He appears to be unfamiliar with the *Extended Cut*, since he is unaware that the parentage of a specific character is specifically acknowledged in the longer version, but then he fails to recognize another character altogether, so it is hard to say how long it has been since he has watched the entire film. He also doesn't recognize the Vivaldi music, since his interests lie elsewhere. On the other hand he does suggest that a certain character is actually a figment of another character's imagination, although that seems limiting, since if one looks at the film from a spiritual perspective, the character could very well exist upon a different plane. In any case, while he has more to work with, and identifies locations and a variety of objects and words that might otherwise be obscure to English speaking viewers, he seems to put less effort into examining more than a handful of Jissôji's carefully designed camera moves, his innovative lighting designs, or other details that he paid more elaborate attention to in the other films.

The fourth platter contains another feature-length film, Jissôji's 1974 *It Was a Faint Dream*, which is far and away a more appropriate trilogy companion, and topper, to *This Transient Life* and *Poem* than *Mandala* comes anywhere close to being. Set in the Thirteenth Century, the story is another melodrama, spanning a generation. Although it is harder to piece together the plot details, the presence of the narrative once again solidifies the film's philosophical explorations and contemplations. Besides, the purposeful difficulties in keeping track of the relationships between the characters makes a great excuse to watch the 120-minute film again, and again. The central character, played by Janet Hatta, is a concubine in the emperor's court who is impregnated by a lord and forced to give up the baby since the lord's wife happens to be having a child at the same time. Such is the stuff that melodramas are made of, but that is just the initial episode in her busy life. She eventually sleeps with a monk who is the brother of an important ruler, miscarries another child, and then spends much of the second half of the film as a nun, on a walking pilgrimage with her maid (who has also become a nun but can't get out of the habit of deferring to her former mistress and serving her) as she seeks to find the daughter she had originally relinquished. The plot details are so oblique and filled with parallels (there are other stories involving half-brothers and half-sisters) that even though the voiceover narrator is male, it is possible the entire tale is being told by the daughter, a famous poet, imagining her mother's life.

Like the other two films, the movie is supported by the well developed characters and performances, and a narrative that takes romantic relationships seriously, so that when it does delve into conversations about existence, other brief digressions or leaps with limited continuity to a new setting and time, it feels like an enhancement and not a distraction. Letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1 and in lovely color from beginning to end, the images are continually captivating and the film is not only wholly rewarding, but open to many return explorations. The sound is equally compelling, including an original score by Ryohei Hirose that consists mostly of classic Japanese music motifs. We eagerly put up the trailer that was included in hopes it would give us more clues to the film's story, but naturally it was no help at all, just promising, truthfully, that the film has lovely cinematography, sex and court intrigue.