

MARK OF THE DEVIL

Directed by Michael Armstrong

(1969) Arrow Video Blu-ray / DVD combo

During the latter centuries of Early Modern Europe witch hunts would see a frightening resurgence as a means to stamp out any elements that were considered anathema to the Christian faith and stronghold of the Church. Although outwardly a coordinated attack on the (apparent) rise of satanic influences in society, ulterior motives saw church and state collude to strip nobility of wealth and land under blatantly false testimony. As the sole witchfinder of his small Austrian city, Albino (Reggie Nalder) commands a brutal control over his community, until word arrives that the feared Lord Dashill Cumberland (Herbert Lom) will soon relieve him of his unholy duties.

Having embarked prior to Cumberland, his assistant, Christian von Merou (Udo Kier), and chief examiner, Jeff Wilkens (Herbert Fux), advise Albino that he is to be replaced and that all official records must be in order before the lord's arrival. Incensed at the news, Albino capitalises on Merou's obvious attraction to tavern girl Vanessa (Olivera Vučo) by denouncing her as a witch when she spurns his advances. Once Cumberland sets foot on the city's cobblestone streets the rumours that preceded him prove well founded. Ruthless, tyrannical, and a rabid advocate of confession through torture, the new witchfinder is revealed as evil incarnate.

Although it raised the ire of censors, and disgust of critics, in the day for its frank and uncompromising depictions of graphic violence, Michael Reeves' *Witchfinder General* (1968) was arguably one of the most influential genre films of its era. Even Gothic horror specialists Hammer Films belatedly wove aspects of the puritanical witch hunts of the Middle Ages into their *Karnstein Trilogy* outing, *Twins of Evil* (1971), following a flourish of similarly themed ventures from competitors proved box office draws. Aside from Gordon Hessler's *Cry of the Banshee* (1970), Jess Franco's *The Bloody Judge* (1970) and Pier Haggard's *Blood on Satan's Claw* (1970), Reeves' film had delivered an unexpected bombshell return in (former West) Germany which saw recent Franco collaborator and actor Adrian Hoven (*Succubus*, 1968) mount a cash-in of his own.

Pairing with twenty five year old British screenwriter and director Michael Armstrong, who had enjoyed modest success with his feature debut *Haunted House of Horror* (1969), Hoven's relationship would prove as tempestuous with the Englishman as that of American International producer Louis M. Heyward on Armstrong's previous picture. Although contemporary interviews with late Spanish filmmaker Jess Franco had nothing but praise for Hoven during their work together (on the "Red Lips" series and *Succubus*, 1968) the veteran German actor and sophomore Brit clashed to such an extent that the two eventually refused to speak to one another. Add to that great calamity with casting, and production in general, and it's a wonder that *Mark of the Devil* was completed at all.

However, once one moves past the film's production woes the disparity with Reeve's far nobler forerunner becomes all too apparent. Opening on imagery of nuns being raped and/or put to the sword, against the accompaniment of Michael Holm's sweeping theme, *Mark of the Devil* continues as it began and throws any suggestion of being a serious treatise of its subject out over setting itself up as a blood and thunder exploitation melodrama. The oft repeated historical falsehood (that eight million people died during the European witch hunts, as opposed to the forty thousand on record) is trotted out and Armstrong, along with Hoven, make their focus a series of moderately grisly set-pieces riven by an antagonist pathologically obsessed with his own sexual dysfunction. It almost feels comical that Cumberland's original motivations, of closeted homosexuality and unrequited lust for his apprentice, were scrapped as too "controversial" over the substituted impotency angle when the film holds back so little anywhere else in its narrative.

Dismissing the film as having any serious aspirations (or condemnation) towards its subject matter aside, *Mark of the Devil* still retains much of its lurid sideshow appeal for modern genre enthusiasts (although it's parade of gruesome horrors have been dramatically diluted by the years). What does endear it beyond those (once) censor-baiting torture sequences is its eccentric cast; a devilish cocktail of veterans, character actors, young ingénues and complete unknowns. Even with his waxen "eagle-beak" theatre nose, Prague-born Herbert Lom (*Mysterious Island*, 1961) dominates as Cumberland throughout. Cult favorite Udo Keir (*Flesh for Frankenstein*, 1973) makes one of his earliest appearances opposite striking Serbian singer and actress Olivera Vučo (*The Feather Gatherers*, 1967). Well-known Austrian character actor Reggie Nalder (*The Man Who Knew Too Much*, 1956) and Herbert Fux (*Funeral in Berlin*, 1966) also appear and deliver memorable turns as ruthless torturers Albino and Wilkens.

What contemporary genre fans may make of *Mark of the Devil* inevitably falls within the realm of personal preference or an ability to come to the film from its historical significance as a censorship *cause célèbre*. The likes of *Saw* (2003) and *Hostel* (2005) or any number of low budget indie shockers (whose



sole *raison d'être*, from a sales standpoint, is to repulse) have long since eclipsed Armstrong's troubled production in both brutality and graphic detail. Yet as a time capsule of its era it maintains academic value as a production well at odds with its peers and a groundbreaker in pushing the envelope as to what was permissible onscreen at the time. Although hardly a patch on its inspiration, *Mark of the Devil* remains an entertaining, if not gaudy, B-movie thriller populated by colorful characters, grisly mayhem and old-world European charm making it well worth the faux history lesson for diehard genre fans and the adventurous alike.

Arrow Video's presentation of Armstrong and Hoven' glorious late sixties shocker is quite the revelation and improves the AV quality dramatically on past editions (even Blue Underground's prior standard definition release). Although the 1.66 framing is debatable the film now looks as vibrant and sharp as one would expect of a modern HD restoration. Audio is present in both uncompressed English and German dubs, with optional English subtitles for either option. As for extras, Arrow load up their release with a wealth of bonus material . . . with some caveats. The audio commentary with Michael Armstrong is a step down from the previously recorded one conducted by author Jonathan Sothcott that was the centrepiece of BU's disc, as the moderator herein frequently wanders off topic and is unfocused (after kicking off with two unforgivable blunders, one debating the film's production year while the copyright notice is onscreen).

Two subsequent featurettes, "Mark of the Times" and "Hallmark of the Devil" touch upon the feature almost as periphery before skewing way off topic yet again ("Times" focusing on indie *Brit*-horror of the seventies and winding up a Norman J. Warren love-in by its long overdue closure). Thankfully, there is some contextual material included with the prior interviews with Austrian and German cast members from Blue Underground's DVD carried over, complimented by the welcome addition of a new (and very animated) interview with composer Michael Holm. Additionally there's a short visual essay looking at the locations "then and now", an extensive stills gallery and a theatrical trailer. All up, a stunning presentation of the feature but Arrow's usual mixed bag with the supplements (some of which are definitely either missed opportunities or non-contextual filler).

Michael Thomason

AWAKEN THE DEVIL

Directed by Daniel E. Falicki

(2014) Chemical Burn Entertainment DVD

Now, what straight-to-DVD horror film would open with a quote from Martin Luther King, Jr.? This one . . .

When we meet brothers Vernon (Jason Roth) and Tom Dopple (Matt Simpson Siegel), they are homeless bums out on some hazily undefined city streets. Vernon is a wide-eyed innocent confined to a wheelchair and is strangely mute. Tom, in contrast, is the reason many people dislike the homeless. Changing out phony signs implying that they are disabled veterans, Tom turns around and spends his panhandling money on hard drugs. Having to skip the homeless shelter due to their zero-tolerance policy on controlled substances, Tom and Vernon settle in at a disused building with newspapers strewn all over the floor. The mute Vernon knows that today will be an extraordinary day, as the Ebonic-worded warning "You Been Chosen" magically appears scrawled on surfaces wherever they go. Falling into narcotic reverie, Tom regales Vernon with stories of their most dysfunctional upbringing. The dead body of a girl (Audria Larsen), seen spirited away by malefic forces before the credits is found underneath the newspapers. Worse still, a satanic pentagram is later found etched into the concrete floor! Both Tom and Vernon must withstand a harrowing night at the hands of demonic entities . . . will they emerge alive to greet the new day?

Awaken the Devil is a most unusual cheapjack horror film. Minimal in the extreme, Tom is the sole speaking part for the majority of the running time. The settings are all courtesy green screens and post-video trickery. All the other people we see outside the brother's insular world are rendered into expressionistic shadows with post-production trickery. In spite of this project's modest budget, the filmmakers do dip into the CGI well for some terrifying succubae female demons and shadowy monstrosities. For whatever reason, Chemical Burn Entertainment has blessed this release a red, muscular demon on loan from the World Wrestling Federation on the DVD's sleeve—go figure!

Awaken the Devil has ambition and vision, using only the scarcest of materials to tell a somewhat engaging story. Many will be able to tell what twists or turns the brothers will face in their hellacious night, right up until the nonsensical ending. The Martin Luther King quote, along with other plot details would lead any audience to think that the film will up a parable about redemption . . . but doesn't, really.

The makers of *Awaken the Devil* deserve kudos for an ambitious story told with the most simplest of resources—but as other Internet snarky critics have said, *Awaken the Devil* fails to keep most viewers awake.

Greg Goodsell

