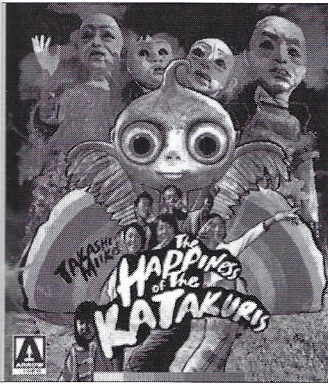


THE HAPPINESS OF THE KATAKURIS

Directed by Takashi Miike

(2001) Arrow Video Blu-ray/DVD Combo



Tucked away in the woods at the foot of Mount Fuji, former shoe salesman Masao Katakuri (Kenji Sawada) and his family have invested their life savings in restoring a creaky old mansion as the White Lovers' Inn guesthouse. Along with wife Terue (Keiko Matsuzaka), father Jinpei (Tetsuro Tanba) and grown-up children Masayuki (Shinji Takeda) and Shizue (Naomi Nishida) Masao sees the Inn as focal to their future happiness. But with the promise of a major highway proving empty, guests are thin on the ground. Truth be known, they're non-existent. All that changes late one evening with the appearance of a singular forlorn visitor who seeks a room to rent.

The following morning, the Katakuris newfound delight turns to horror when they discover their first guest has committed suicide, leaving them in a terrible quandary. Should they report their misfortune to the police and risk

destroying the Inn's almost non-existent reputation, or should they simply get rid of all the evidence and carry on as though nothing ever happened? For Masao, whose entire redundancy is tied up in the property, the decision is an easy one. However, it's a choice that proves the catalyst to a further wave of dead bodies, as well as the arrival of the rather shady Richard Sagawa (Kiyoshiro Imawano) who has his sights set on Shizue's bank account.

Outwardly the origin of Takashi Miike's *The Happiness of the Katakuris* (2001) is almost more comical than the end product itself in that, faced with an upcoming maverick of Japanese cinema who had turned out gloriously violent Yakuza films and a pair of international cult hits with *Audition* (1999) and *Ichi the Killer* (2001), the executives at Shochiku studios paused and said "Yeah . . . but can he do comedy?" The remake rights to Kim Jee-woon's (*I Saw the Devil*, 2010) debut feature, black comedy *The Quiet Family* (1998), were on the table and, in true Miike style, the eccentric auteur saw the perfect opportunity to re-jig the South Korean sleeper hit for Japanese audiences as . . . a musical! With Claymation bridging vignettes, no less. Could such an eclectic fusion of seemingly divergent ideas possibly work as a collective whole? It's Miike, right?

With the exception of its numerous colorful musical interludes and the addition of some new characters, as well as fleshing out the various back stories of the family members themselves, *The Happiness of the Katakuris* adheres undeniably closely to its South Korean source. There are passages, along with camera setups and individual shots, littered throughout that Miike lifts almost verbatim from Kim's original. However, as Kikumi Yamagishi's (*Hara-Kiri: Death of a Samurai*, 2011) adaptation progresses, Miike makes the story his own and often races away thereafter on wild flights of fancy that set it well apart from its progenitor. Whether that be elfin winged creatures popping up in soup bowls, or singers taking flight mid-song amidst rousing displays of fireworks, Miike is determined not to take his subject matter remotely seriously, and he insists that we as his audience follow suit.

Performances are uniformly broad, as one would expect of an Asiatic comedy, however Miike strings together a cohesive ensemble as the Katakuris themselves, headlining the family with former Tigers lead singer Kenji Sawada as patriarch Masao. Sawada is capably paired with veteran actress Keiko Matsuzaka (*Legend of the Eight Samurai*, 1983) as wife Terue, along with iconic Japanese cinema legend Tetsuro Tanba (1922–2006) (*You Only Live Twice*, 1967) in the role of his father, Jinpei. As the Katakuri children, Shinji Takeda (*Pulse*, 2001) essays the ex-con Masayuki and Naomi Nishida (*Swing Girls*, 2004) the rather ditty divorcee Shizue. Arguably, the most memorable turn for any viewer is that of "Japan's King of Rock," Kiyoshiro Imawano (1951–2009) as the spectacularly sleazy Richard Sagawa, one of Yamagishi's new characters, who manages to steal the show for a good portion of his screen-time (inclusive of the aforementioned airborne vocalizing).

Aside from a polished cast delivering a truly eccentric array of characters, as well as belting out everything from cabaret to show tunes to rock songs (admittedly, none particularly memorable beyond their locations in the film), the key element of entertainment within *The Happiness of the Katakuris* is the insane manner in which it veers all over the place like an out-of-control vehicle, seemingly teasing the audience as to how big the crash is going to be when it eventuates. Remarkably, the expectant disaster never occurs, and as a result, Miike manages to keep us onboard for almost two hours of off-amusing (occasionally absurd) horror, comedy, singing and dancing. Within the opening sequence, Miike sets the tone for what's to come, instantly averting audience expectations of their anticipated journey over the course of his blackly comic tale; being that the grotesque little Claymation vignette is no more than a bridging platform to transport us to our protagonists and story proper. If you're willing to accept that Mr. Miike is having as much fun with his audience as he is with his (twisted) narrative, then *The Happiness of Katakuris* should entertain you to no end.

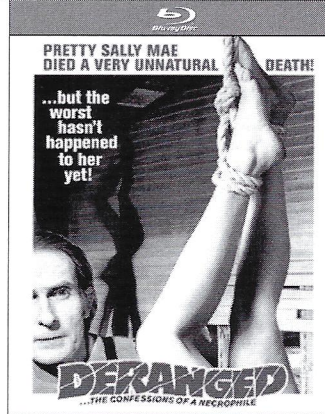
Arrow's Blu-ray/DVD combo features: A brand new HD film transfer of the film that look stunning, and seems to have ironed out the problematic issues with black levels on Arrow's previous Japanese titles; LPCM stereo Japanese audio, with optional English subtitles (a missed opportunity, sadly, as the film was post-synched in Dolby 5.1); audio commentary by Takashi Miike (subtitled); audio commentary by Miike biographer Tom Mes; making Of featurette (31m); interviews with Miike & select cast (63m); claymation featurette (5m); new visual essay on Miike by biographer Tom Mes; trailer & TV spot; and a 40 page booklet. This fantastic package from Arrow Films is about as good as it gets.

Michael Thomason

DERANGED

Directed by Jeff Gillen and Alan Ormsby

(1974) Kino Lorber Blu-ray / DVD



1972's *Children Shouldn't Play With Dead Things* needs little introduction to *Scream* readers. The bizarre, weirdly funny and endlessly quotable exercise in low-budget ghoulishness was frequently televised throughout the 1980s and remains a home video staple to this day. *Children* marked the collaborative debut of writer/star Alan Ormsby, actor Jeff Gillen and director Bob (then "Benjamin") Clark (responsible for films ranging from *Porky's* to two wildly

different but equally enduring Yuletide offerings: the original *Black Christmas* and *A Christmas Story*). The success of *Children* ensured that the trio would keep quite busy both together and separately over the years. Ormsby took the director's chair himself for the "drag" comedy *The Great Masquerade* (aka *Murder on the Emerald Seas*); this 1974 regional obscurity was seen by virtually noone but suddenly resurfaced seemingly out of nowhere and was recently reviewed in this very publication. Clark then reclaimed the helm for the far more gravely disturbing Ormsby-scripted *Deathdream* (aka *Dead of Night*), which also happened to introduce the world to the special makeup effects of one Tom Savini. Shaking his head at his own flamboyant performance in *Children* (which he does to this day), Ormsby limited his on-screen appearance to a mere cameo in the latter; and by the time of his third and final 1974 release, he was content to appear exclusively in a photograph.

For *Deranged*, Ormsby and Gillen teamed as co-directors of Ormsby's script, while Bob Clark served as editor and co-producer but kept his name off the film for personal reasons. Tom Savini was quite understandably retained to provide more gruesome makeup illusions. Producer Tom Karr had approached Ormsby to create a project based on the real-life exploits of the legendary Wisconsin murderer and body snatcher Ed Gein (circa 1954-1957). Gein's macabre activities (including human taxidermy) had already inspired such films as Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*, Tobe Hooper's *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* and the early William Girdler effort *Three on a Meathook* and would continue to do so throughout the ensuing decades, but *Deranged* would be the first such film to provide an approximation of how the events actually took place (with names changed to protect the guilty and innocent alike, however). But where Ormsby had approached the war-horror allegory of *Deathdream* with the utmost seriousness, the creepy absurdities of the true-crime tale before him in this case inspired Ormsby to return to his earlier stylings of black humor.

The late, great Roberts Blossom (an expert character actor specializing in crotchety oddballs all the way through Sam Raimi's 1995 *The Quick and the Dead*) toplines as "Ezra Cobb, the Butcher of Woodside," whom we meet taking care of his invalid mother (Cosette Lee), a harridan who raised him on a strict diet of fire and brimstone ("The wages of sin is gonorrhea, syphilis and DEATH!"). When Mother Cobb dies (after a most unpleasant "feeding" scene), Ezra simply refuses to acknowledge this reality even though he attends her funeral and knows exactly where she's buried. For the moment, at least.

When "Ez" finally unearths his mother, he sees (and, of course, hears) her as he always remembered her—only the audience sees what time and Tom (Savini, that is) have actually made out of Mother Cobb. And it's only after consulting with her that Ez gets up the nerve to go out and approach other female companions . . . with, of course, fatal results that also go blithely unrealized by Ez even as he takes up the "hobby" of taxidermy to preserve the aftermath. As played by Blossom, Ez certainly isn't evil—he is the epitome of film's namesake title. The townsfolk don't suspect "kooky old Ez." They're amused by his harmless eccentricities and even laugh at the joke when Ez matter-of-factly owns up to his role in the recent disappearances haunting Woodside. The town itself (Canada effectively substitutes for the rural American setting) is ultimately held