

THE SEARCH FOR WENG WENG

Directed by Andrew Leavold
(2207) Wild Eye Releasing DVD

A passion project with over twenty years of research by cult film historian/former video store owner/Aussie director Andrew Leavold, *The Search for Weng Weng* is an investigative narrative into the outlandish, short-lived career of diminutive Filipino actor Weng Weng. Captivated for years by the VHS of Weng Weng's best-known work—a lowbrow James Bond take-off entitled *For Y'ur Height Only* (Eddie Nicart, 1981)—Leavold took his MiniDV camera to the Philippines for answers, and through sheer luck and determination, encountered those who directly worked with the 2'9" performer—including directors, editors and stunt men.

First, Leavold provides crucial context by interconnecting the various B-movies in the ether just before Weng Weng's success, things such as *James Batman* (1966)—a Bond/Batman spoof—and the work of Chito Guerrero, a lively actor interviewed good-naturedly by Leavold. I believe it's he who introduces Leavold to director Eddie Nicart (a hero of sorts to the filmmaker), and that's when the details of Weng Weng's sometimes-sad life really begin to emerge. By the close, Leavold has talked to Weng Weng's brother and is even invited to a soiree hosted by the infamously excessive Imelda Marcos, widow to former dictator Ferdinand. She offers her scatterbrain thoughts on what Weng Weng represented to the Philippines.

Since Filipino exploitation films have been so neglected over time, the confirmation of how many films feature or star Weng Weng is up for debate (on the 2014 commentary, Leavold confirms a total of 14, some of which exist only as titles to him). The white-suit Agent 00 films—*Height Only* and *The Impossible Kid* (Eddie Nicart, 1982)—have been released to DVD, but the glimpses in this doc may be the only chance to see what the ill-conceived western *Da Best in Da West* (1984) looks like.

Unfortunately, Weng Weng passed away of a heart attack in 1992, a common occurrence with those born of dwarfism, but Leavold uses his film as a launch-pad to celebrate Weng Weng's inimitable cinematic presence. It's also an examination into how the callous Philippines government somehow fostered—for a short period of time—a successful industry of 300+ films a year. And, finally, there are possible reports of Weng Weng's financial interests given the short shrift by producers (and, it seems, caretakers) Peter and Cora Caballes (the duo behind Liliw Productions). It seems Weng Weng wasn't adequately compensated, and died penniless.

Above it all, you're a fly-on-the-wall as Leavold enthusiastically interacts with his heroes of forgotten Filipino exploitation cinema, capturing their thoughts at food courts, film societies and retrospective festivals.

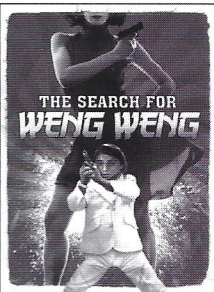
Can you consider this a companion piece to Mark Hartley's 2010 *Machete Maidens Unleashed*? Yes and no. Leavold serves as an Associate Producer on that work, and though there's a brief tribute to Weng Weng, Hartley's film is much more of a conventional talking-heads exploration of American B movies photographed in the Philippines due to the financial benefits. *Search for Weng Weng* is even more niche.

The popularity of Weng Weng may wane today in the Philippines, but back in 1982, he was the toast of the 1st Annual Manila International Film Festival. It was a significant occasion and marked his highpoint but the moment—and fad—soon passed. Weng Weng was forgotten for a good decade and a half, but thankfully, Leavold's film—plus a popular youtube video ("I Love Weng Weng")—has now introduced him to younger generations.

Extras on the disc include a commentary track by Leavold, recorded on September 30, 2014—just a day after the death of director Eddie Nicart, Leavold remarks. So much of the doc was left to chance, so Leavold relays such anecdotes as unknowingly being across a dinner table from the man who discovered Weng Weng—Dante Pangilinan, director of *Chop Suey Meet Big Time Papa* (1978).

Even better than the commentary is an extended 50-minute interview with director/stuntman Eddie Nicart, a real character I was hoping to see more of in the feature-length documentary. There's also a 9-minute extended interview with Weng Weng's brother, a Q&A with Leavold conducted at the Sydney Underground Film Festival (audio only), a bonus interview with actor Dalito (17 minutes, audio only), the "I Love Weng Weng" music video by Roy Arabejo that reached massive audiences via youtube, plus a trailer for *Gone Lesbo Gone*. (The latter is Leavold's first film—a tribute to the work of Doris Wishman.)

Wild Eye Releasing gets points for including such a wide breadth of supplemental materials.



THE EXECUTIONER

Directed by Luis Garcia Berlanga
(1963) The Criterion Collection Blu-Ray / DVD

Considered by many to be one of the most important if not the greatest Spanish film of all time, Luis Garcia Berlanga's *The Executioner* makes its prestigious bow on home video thanks to the persevering efforts of Criterion.

Jose Luis Rodriguez (Nino Manfredi) is an aimless roustabout living in the bleakly monochromatic world of Francoist Spain who earns his meager wages working as an undertaker, a job viewed as second only to public executioner in odiousness. One afternoon while hauling out the body of a condemned prisoner with his partner, Jose Luis comes into contact with the elderly agent of death himself, Amadeo (José Isbert), when Jose's partner offers the old man a ride back to his place in order to better squeeze out the morbid details of his profession, details that visibly unnerve the restless Jose. Amadeo, for his part, is exceedingly proud of his work, carping about his vital role in society and the Americans' championing of their more "humane" methods of execution over the Spanish garrote. A forgotten kit-bag entices Jose Luis to journey to Amadeo's modest hovel to return it, a trip that feels much more worthwhile after he meets the executioner's attractive daughter, Carmen (Emma Penella).

In short order Jose Luis manages to extricate himself from the cramped room he shares with his tailor brother (José Luis López Vázquez), shrewish sister-in-law (Maria Luisa Ponte), and mewling nieces and nephews to land in Carmen's bed, much to the horror and consternation of Amadeo. A quick remedy is devised: marriage. In a scathing lampoon of the marked dichotomy between the rich and the not-so-rich, Jose's and Carmen's church wedding follows on the heels of another conjoining members of the upper crust, all the beautiful decorations from the first ceremony unceremoniously cleared away by the clergy as the attending priest fights to read aloud the rites of marriage in the dying glow of the candles being snuffed out as he speaks!

Matters seem to be looking up after this rushed affair, with Carmen joyfully pregnant and a brand-new apartment being lined up for Amadeo as a reward for his decades of dedicated state service. Amadeo, however, is being edged out of the job: the government believes that the man has reached respectable retirement age, even though Amadeo effuses that he could go on strangling prisoners to his own dying day. But the apartment must be in the ownership of a state employee; with Amadeo retired, the three of them would be forced out into the street.

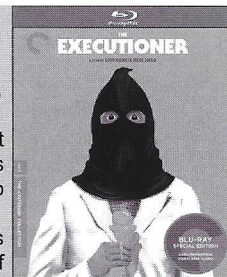
So it only seems natural that the newly-anointed son-in-law should assume the family business.

The very thought of taking the life of another human being strikes Jose Luis with terror and revulsion, even with the act being given the blessings of his family and society at large. After being wrestled into the government offices where he warily fills out the application for the abandoned post, Jose Luis lives out the next few months in a fit of delicate optimism. The funds and amenities that come with his new position, like a comfortable spring mattress, are graciously welcomed, but the ex-undertaker knows that at any moment the news of a prisoner awaiting their punishment will come to darken his doorstep and change his life forever.

The news does indeed come, but the family attempts to treat it as an opportunity to vacation in the beautiful sunshine of Majorca, hoping against hope that the condemned will die in prison, or receive a pardon. But as we all know, everything comes with a price, and it will soon come time for Jose Luis to determine what the price of his sleep and conscience will be.

Taking a nugget of truth from the real-life case of murderess Pilar Prades Expósito Santamaria in which her assigned executioner succumbed to a state of shock and had to be coerced into carrying out the deed, Berlanga fleshed out the notion of the unfit and unwilling executioner into a potent sample of cinematic tragicomedy that many scholars and enthusiasts claim to be his masterpiece. Nearly all the laughs that the film engenders in the audience are tagged with a note of sadness or horror, from the inconvenient poverty that marks Jose Luis' and Amadeo's existence preceding their social mobilization to the exasperation of Carmen asking her clueless husband for his shirt size before referring to her father's wisdom, who is able to determine the width of Jose Luis' neck with a single glance. For a movie that features the grim specter of the garrote looming in the background, it seems entirely appropriate that every chuckle in the film should catch in our throats.

The key to the staying power of *The Executioner* is that it never falls into the tempting trap of polemics and speechifying. The character who comes closest to espousing philosophy is Amadeo, but he, like Jose Luis, speaks solely from the realm of personal experience and interest. These are not straw men built to siphon the filmmakers' political views onto the silver screen. They are fully-formed characters who voice their own thoughts and feelings regardless of the wider world around them. Jose Luis believes that the death penalty is wrong, particularly after he is hired as the new executioner, but he believes this mainly because *he* doesn't want to do it. In this sense he truly represents the common citizen: he has strong moralistic beliefs but he never acts on them if the given situation doesn't directly involve him. Why protest in the streets against Franco's brutal regime so long as he gets to enjoy the fruits that come from it? As long as it isn't his neck caught in the steely embrace of the garrote, then why lose sleep over capital punishment?



Aaron Graham