

THE COLOSSUS OF NEW YORK

Directed by Eugene Lourie
(1958) Olive Films DVD

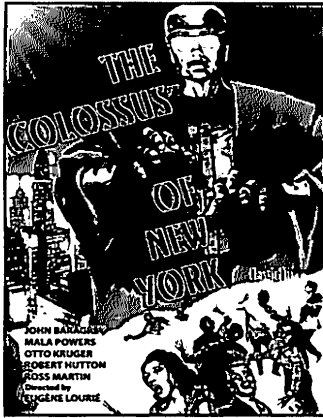
Olive Films presents the first official DVD release of a Paramount production which featured a most impressive cinematic automaton, but which never quite scaled the heights of the classics of its era.

Dr. Jeremy Spenser (*The Wild, Wild West's* Ross Martin) is a genius humanitarian scientist who has been awarded a prestigious international prize (it isn't actually named, but he goes to Geneva to pick it up) on the cusp of his greatest breakthrough in the field of alleviating the problem of world hunger. Unfortunately, immediately on his return, he's killed in a freak accident, leaving behind his wife Anne (Mala Powers) and young son Billy (Charles Herbert). But Jeremy's father William (Otto Kruger) refuses to let go: insisting that the world cannot do without his son's genius, he secretly preserves Jeremy's still-living brain, eventually persuading his reluctant other son Henry (John Baragrey) to utilize his expertise in automation in order to construct a robotic framework through which Jeremy's brain can continue his good work. If only the elder Spenser had listened to his colleague Professor Carrington (Robert Hutton), who had previously opined that a mind without a living body would cease to have a soul . . .

The artificial body (now portrayed by Ed Wolff, explaining Martin's relatively low billing for such a crucial role), the tormented brain ("Jeremy" makes it very clear from the beginning that he's extremely unhappy with his new situation, but allows William to convince him—at least temporarily—to continue with the project) and the question of the soul place *The Colossus of New York* squarely in the company of *Frankenstein*, and that, in itself, is a perfectly fine and worthy theme to tackle. However, the film goes on to compromise itself by invoking 1939's *Son of Frankenstein* a little too directly when the Colossus (never actually called by that name in the film) defies orders and makes contact with young Billy (right down to the line "Gosh, are you a real giant?"). Far more interesting is the concept that has Jeremy's brain, deprived of all five authentic senses, develop a powerful sixth sense which allows him to mentally follow his various family members whenever he pleases. Couple that with the loss of true humanity, and eventually hindsight suggests that perhaps it wasn't the very best idea in the world to equip the eyes of the Colossus with radioactive death rays . . .

Okay, that's one plot hole, and thinking about it only makes it worse. Would a genius brain find itself truly unable to jury-rig a method of reaching its own self-destruct switch if that was what it really wanted? Since the Colossus was never meant to leave the lab, why (never mind how) did Henry render it waterproof? (Well, as director Lourie had previously given us *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* and would move on to *The Giant Behemoth* and *Gorgo*, he probably found the staging of some artificial "underwater" footage irresistible, so I guess I just answered my own question). But that's not what counts in the end—what viewers want to see is the Colossus finally "losing it" and making its way to the United Nations, and the film certainly delivers where it counts. Lourie also strives to make the low-budget production stand out in other departments: the emphasis on humanitarian/spiritual philosophy is given more than cursory attention, and the mood is set by an unusually elegant title sequence (the image of the U.N. building is set to a grim piano score by Van Cleave as the titles themselves reflect off the waters as they rise from the surface). In the end, *The Colossus of New York* relies a bit too much on material both overly familiar and illogical (even in the context of fantasy) to rank as classic science-fiction, but the innovations it does possess keep it entertaining and ultimately worthwhile.

Shane M. Dallmann



RARE EXPORTS: A CHRISTMAS STORY

Directed by Jalmari Helander
(2010) Oscilloscope Laboratories Blu Ray/DVD combo



Rare Exports is a Finnish film about a giant, killer Santa Claus and his horde of feral elves. Sounds great, doesn't it? Lurid, exploitative? Well . . . sorry to disabuse you of that notion, but *Rare Exports* is actually a rather family-friendly (some profanity and some old-man nudity aside) fantasy-comedy with an intriguing premise, superb production values and impressive location shooting in snowy Norway (not Finland—director Jalmari Helander said Norway had the mountainous landscape he wanted).

Rare Exports follows two short films, made in 2003 and 2005, which set up the basic idea of a race of feral old men who are captured and trained to become Santa Clauses, then exported around the world. Both of the shorts were essentially one-joke pictures with no real plot or character development. The feature version is a prequel which explains, expands and elaborates on the original premise; an actual plot is concocted and, even more importantly, the

protagonists are multi-dimensional characters we know and care about.

Shortly before Christmas, young Pietari and his friend Juuso spy on a group of workers excavating a large pit on a nearby mountain. Later, when the local reindeer herd is wiped out—apparently by wolves from across the Russian border—Pietari, his father Rauno, and Rauno's friends Aimo and Piiparinen visit the mountain to demand compensation from the construction company, believing a hole in the site's fence allowed the lupine intruders access (Pietari is stricken with guilt, since he was the one who cut the fence).

No one can be found, but Pietari discovers a computer image of the pit, showing an amorphous figure enclosed in a mass of ice. Pietari researches the "true story of Santa Claus," and learns the legendary figure's original purpose was to punish naughty children (whipping them, boiling them in a pot, etc.) not deliver gifts to good kids. A strange, silent, bearded old man is trapped by Rauno, who decides to ransom this "Santa Claus" to the multinational company as compensation for their dead livestock. However, Rauno and his friends learn this isn't Santa Claus, but rather one of his "elves"—hundreds more suddenly appear, threatening the Finns. Santa Claus himself is still encased in a block of ice (two gigantic horns protruding from the mass suggest his enormous size). All the local children have been kidnaped by the elves, and will receive their punishment from Santa as soon as the ice thaws. Pietari rises to the occasion, not to save Christmas, but to save the town's children from Father Christmas.

The central figure of *Rare Exports* is Pietari (Onni Tommila), still young enough to carry around a favorite stuffed animal and believe in the legendary Santa Claus, yet old enough to be entrusted with a rifle, and to concoct a plan to prevent the real, evil Santa Claus from being unleashed on the world. The interactions between Pietari and his father, as well as the slightly-older Juuso, are completely believable, helped in no small measure by the script and performances. The Christmas Eve sequence, as Pietari and his father silently mourn the missing person in their life (Pietari's mother, presumably dead), is understated but effective and affecting.

Rauno, Aimo, and Piiparinen are the other main characters in the film, and they function as a semi-comic trio, arguing among themselves in a good-natured manner, but cooperating when necessary. Presumably they're meant to represent the no-nonsense, indomitable Finnish spirit, stubbornly dealing with whatever adversity man or nature throws their way. They may curse or complain, and maybe they aren't the "sharpest knives in the drawer," but they don't panic and they don't back down, even when confronted by a horde of angry "elves" and a monstrous, ice-bound Santa Claus.

Rare Exports doesn't have a low-budget, "independent" look (neither did the short films, which were actually made by another, established commercial production company): the widescreen photography is superb, the special effects are fine (although I for one would like to have seen the giant, evil Santa in action), and the sound, music, production design, etc., are all top-notch. While this is Helander's first feature credit, he has extensive experience making shorts, commercials, and so on, and shows no hesitation in his directorial choices. The film is paced quite well, building suspense and mystery gradually, then shifting into high gear in the last section, parallel-cutting between events in high action-film style.

There are, as always, a few minor flaws, mostly plot holes which aren't sutured up and/or inconsistencies and unexplained aspects (to pick one: isn't it odd that Pietari just happened to have books in his house which explained the history of the Santa Claus legend? Did he stop off at the village library? His father is the local butcher, not a scholar, so it hardly seems likely he'd have an old book in his house debunking the "Coca Cola" Santa Claus image, doesn't it?). However, these don't detract from the film in any serious way.

It should be noted, however, that the original short films raised expectations of a gorier, louder, more traditional monster film, and some viewers may feel misled. *Rare Exports* retains the black humor and the basic, twisted premise of the shorts, but goes in a different direction. Pietari's quest to earn his father's approval, his fear of being judged "naughty," his transition from childhood to adolescence—although the viewer isn't bludgeoned with them, these underlying themes are clearly in evidence.

Don't see *Rare Exports* expecting a tale of wild killer Santas ravaging an isolated Finnish village. Instead, expect dry humor, interesting characters, impressive locations, an original premise, good performances, slick production values and effects, and a fair amount of excitement and suspense.

David Wilt