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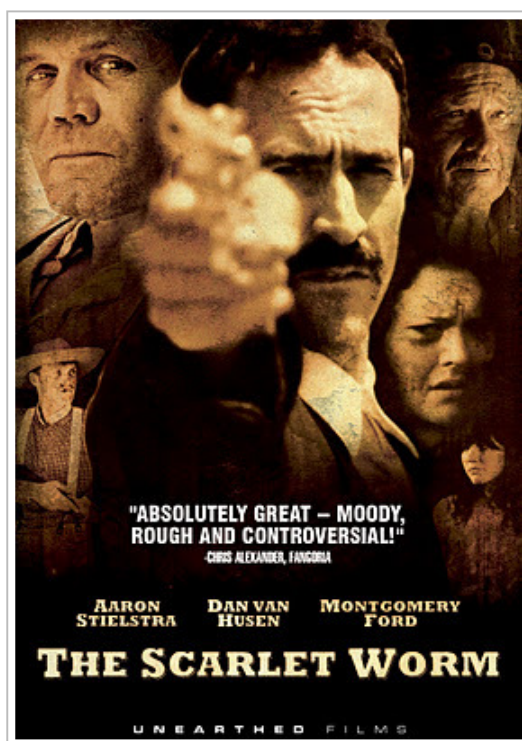
Through the writings and photography of Robert Barry Francos, a view of the arts and culture, including everyday life.

SUNDAY, JANUARY 22, 2012

DVD Review: *The Scarlet Worm*

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Images from the Internet



The Scarlet Worm

Directed by Michael Fredianelli

Unearthed Films, 2011

93 minutes, USD \$14.95

Unearthedfilms.com

MVDvisual.com

When I think of no-to-low-budget, independent films, the genres that tend to crop up are either low-ball horror or lower-ball (pun intended) comedy (or a mixture of both). It's certainly not a western, and especially not one as well made as this.

In addition, when one is viewing indie films on this level, there is a bit of an expectation that the acting will be more along the line of John

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About Me

[Robert Barry Francos](#)

Currently living in Saskatoon (email at RBF55@msn.com for address). From 1977-88, I used to publish a print version of a music magazine in New York called FFanzeen, which dealt with the wide-ranging independent music scene. I also photographed many bands from the period (and since). Now I write this blog, and have a column at jerseybeat (dot)

Lithgow sit-com scenery chewing, rather than John Lithgow dramatic film acting. While there are a couple of somewhat stiff performances here and there from minor roles, generally the performances are top-notch and equal to many of the majors.

The story takes place in 1909, and revolves around Print (Aaron Stielstra), a hired gunslinger for Mr. Paul (Montgomery Ford, aka Brett Halsey), a corrupt cattle baron. Apparently this is a serial position, as Print was trained by previous gunhand Hank (Kevin Giffin), who was in turn instructed by Mr. Paul. Now it's Print's turn to pass on his knowledge to Lee (Derek Hertig) a young'n' assigned by Mr. Paul.

See, while Print ain't the sharpest stick in the stack, he *believes* he is, and that is just part of his (literally) saving grace, because what he lacks in thought he gains in instinct. Along with an artistic flair that is way out of place in the Wild West, he turns his many, many, many killings in his "paintings" by posing the bodies, or by the style and grace in which he kills. Death is his poetry (though he claims to write some, which we never actually hear, probably for the better good).

Stielstra, looking like a cross between a shorter Sasha Baron Cohen, Frank Zappa and Tony Shaloub - and I could also add in Daniel Day Lewis in his *There Will Be Blood* role - is ideal as Print. Having worked with director Michael Fredianelli a few times, he smartly underplays the character, as is mentioned in one of the commentaries, because Print is such a weird and anachronistic dude that it could easily have been done over the top, but by reigning it in and using his eyes and mouth twitches to emote a lot, he brings more of a reality to the character. Even when some of his dialog is neo-*Dirty Harry* or *Pulp Fictionesque*, he finds a way to pull it off without sounding hokey, such as when he describes his Smith & Wesson pistol (though mostly he uses a rifle): "It's about as pretty as a Sunday morning...I got a feelin' it's the kind of gun that God might carry."

As with most indie films with almost no budget, the crew hold multiple jobs. In this case, Stielstra also wrote much of the original music, including singing up front with the Road Apples (lyrics by the film's writer, David Lambert), and also handled all the exploding squibs (i.e., "blood" filled condoms).

Hertig, who plays his protégé Lee, has a Rick Schroeder vibe going, especially with the deep blue eyes. At times he acts like a deer-in-headlights, which actually contradicts his wilder "young" days shown in B&W flashbacks. Still, he portrays the character well, starting as someone who's never killed a person to one who makes up for lost time. Gratefully, the makers did not go the cliché *protégé vs. mentor* route, but rather an entirely different path.

The role of Hank essentially mirrors the Gene Wilder character from *Blazing Saddles* in many ways. Written for an older person (Wilder's was written for John Wayne, who turned down the role), Giffin takes the role and makes it work even as one not much older than his

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trainee (Print). Like “the Kid,” Hank got tired of killing and crawled into a bottle when not a barber, but comes back as a rescuing hero (without getting shot in the ass by a prepubescent). While being hard, Giffin also shows some of a humanistic side that makes the character likeable.

Before I discuss the next main characters, I need to make something clear. On one of the commentary tracks, Producer Mike Molloy adamantly insists that this film is not based on the style of the Spaghetti Western, but rather later revisionist westerns, and I wholeheartedly agree. A better comparison would be, say, *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* or those by Peckinpaw than anything by director Leone. I mean, nearly *everyone* is just *filthy*, with dust and dirt smeared on their bodies, faces, and clothes. Okay, that needed to be said before I went forward, because the plot of the story is Print being hired by Mr. Paul to kill a brothel owner who performs abortions when necessary (which is apparently often) on his prostitutes (I counted five of the ladies). It is for this reason that the film is broken up into five chapters, each with an antiquated term for the prenatal development of a child (e.g., A Quickening, Ensoulment, and Curettage).

As a side note: practically the only women in the cast are those who work in the cat house, and are severely underwritten compared to most of the men. This is definitely a weak spot, as at least one of them could have been a much better character. Rita Rey plays Annabelle, to whom we are introduced mid-abortion. Her actions change the course of the film, yet she gets very little dialog, and what screen time she does get she is naked more often than not.

Getting back to the matter, as with Leone’s *A Fist Full of Dollars*, Print is caught between two powerful men, both with heavily armed hired men behind them, and who hate each other for reasons that seem obvious at first, but there is something underlying that we learn a bit later. Along the way is a huge body count that makes most horror films pale in comparison. And yes, there will be blood.

As the first of the two butting heads, Mr. Paul is played by Ford (née Halsey), a veteran actor of high caliber (pun intended) dating back a large number of years, but his specialty was - yep, you guessed it - westerns, and especially of the spaghetti subgenre. You’ll probably recognize him, as he’s also been in hundreds of television shows, usually as a guest star rather than a series regular. His acting is nonchalant and natural, more like he’s talking than playing a character. He makes it look very easy to be both evil and likeable.

On the other side of the equation is the brothel proprietor, Heinrich Kley, played by veteran German actor, Dan van Husen. Husen has a long history of playing Nazis in some A-level films, and in - yes, again - spaghetti westerns (many with Lee van Cleef). Kley is initially also likeable, even though he forces his “girls” to abort their babies, which he considers necessary evils. A religious man, he backs his actions as getting rid of the children of demons (e.g., drunks, violent men).

Having Print go after him on the proposal of his being an abortionist has a pro-life feel that made me uncomfortable (the film's writer, Lambert, claims this was not the case, though), but even Print is somewhat persuaded by Kley's reasoning. Kley actually comes across as a level-headed guy until he feels betrayed, and then shows some of his true nasty stripes.

Print, through setting up a situation with rival cowhands that he's angered, works his way into Kley's trust, and starts working for him as *his* enforcer. Lee tags along as his son, who falls for Annabelle (apparently his *first*).

Duplicity and lust leads to a couple of stupendous shoot-outs with dozens lying dead, and even some of the anti-heroes in rough shape. No, I'm not going to give away too much of the well-written and multi-layered story.

The look of the film, under the eye of cinematographer Michael Martinez, is quite outstanding. He uses a bit of a washed-out look to the film, and with an almost sped up look like it's shot at 20 frame's per second, especially during the action sequences. The lighting is glaring sometimes in an appropriate way (such as the red shades across Print's face when he's talking to Kley). There are a couple of scenes where the light looks a bit different from different angles, but what the heck, the end product looks great.

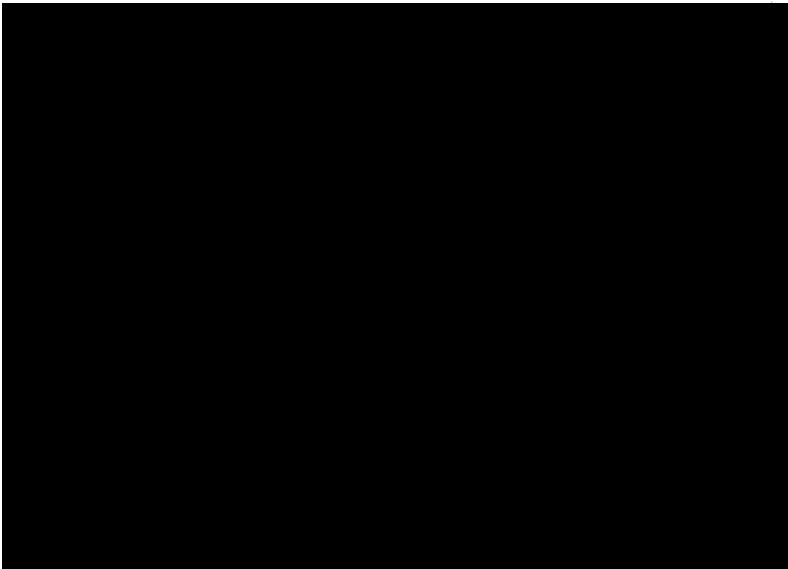
There are two commentary tracks, but none with the director, sadly. The better is the first one, with writer David Lambert and some of the actors of secondary characters, but worked as crew as well. While about 20 percent of this is *whatever*, there are a lot of really good nuggets in the rest, including how the film got made, anecdotal stories about the cast, opinions on specific scenes and shots, and other little detail tidbits we love. Apparently, Lambert is a Wild West buff, and he used a lot of his research in the film, which shows. One fact he points out that got my interest is that Print's character is based on two actual people from the period, one of whom was named Killin' Jim Miller. I would have, however, loved to have heard a bit more about what the title means, which is explained in the film, but I just didn't get it.

The second voiceover track is with producers Mike Molloy and Eric Zaldivar, the latter who also does well playing Kley's weakest-link son, Gus (he was also second unit director). While there is quite a bit of additional information about the making of the film and its crew, they seem a bit less confident in this off-the-cuff role, and tend to step on each other. Zaldivar (who is not as well mic'd) commonly asks, "Should we talk about (so-and-so)?" Molloy keeps second guessing himself with statements like, "Well, I don't know if I'm supposed to mention (so-and-so), but..." However, I would like to add that I have heard so much worse tracks than this, and there is quite a bit of data, making it worth the listen. Though, I have to say, for a low budget film, two commentary tracks, really? That's 3 hours above

the time of the film itself. It may have been better, in hindsight, having Lambert and Molloy do it together.

Anyway, another bonus is subtitles, but only in Spanish. There are also about a half-dozen trailers, including some by the various crew of this film. There is also a brief seven-minute featurette with the long title, "Of Worms and Dogs: How Wild Dogs Productions Made *The Scarlet Worm*." Directed by Molloy, it's a light piece of fluff that doesn't really have much point, looking like it was directed by someone in a college film class, but it also obviously was quite work intensive with many edits. Am I sorry I watched it? No, it was enjoyable, just not essential. Best part was getting to see the cast/crew be themselves.

This is a low-budget film, and in case one forgets that, there are a couple of reminders here and there. For example, a couple of times someone who is wearing a hat is shot in the head, and after a spray of blood, of course they die. However, as they fall, their hats come off and the head is unwounded. I found this amusing. As for the story, there is one big potential opportunity missed at the end: a certain character is killed off who is a bit of a milquetoast, which I think is a mistake. Having him come back as a killer bound for revenge in a sequel would have been the right move. And from the commentaries, it sounds like a sequel is in the works, though no mention of it is made on any Websites, and the director has made half a dozen films since this one. I hope it gets made, and I look forward to more of Michael Fredianelli output. This one really shines.



Posted by [Robert Barry Francos](#) at 12:01 AM 

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