



THE SCARLET WORM

Directed by Michael Fredianelli
(2011) Unearthed Films Blu-ray / DVD

The Scarlet Worm is a gritty, violent, weird Western from prolific indie director Michael Fredianelli, shot on a shoestring but looking like a much more grandly budgeted film. Made by a group of film fanatics (most of whom appear in the film and served as co-producers), it references everything from classic spaghetti Westerns to the work of the Coen Brothers.

Print (Aaron Stielstra) is a dapper hired gun for corrupt rancher Mr. Paul (Brett Halsey). Not content to simply kill cattle thieves and rival cowboys, Print takes a more "poetic" approach, executing elaborately planned assassinations and then staging the bodies in bizarre (and often sexually suggestive) poses; when the film opens, he's just stuffed the naked corpse of a man (screenwriter David Lambert) inside the carcass of a butchered steer.

Mr. Paul asks Print to make an example of a creepy German brothel owner named Heinrich Kley (Dan van Husen, whose credits include everything from Herzog's *Nosferatu* to *Salon Kitty* and a number of spaghetti Westerns). Kley has been performing brutal abortions on his small stable of prostitutes, which makes him a particularly appealing target to the righteous Print. With the help of a young killer-in-training (Derek Hertig), he sets about ingratiating himself with the Teutonic abortionist in preparation for his execution.

Of course, things don't go as planned and the two gunmen find themselves pulled into a series of bloody and violent gunfights.

The film looks fantastic, whether the camera is sweeping across classic Western vistas (hey, there's Vasquez Rocks!) or lingering on the appropriately unerotic squalor of the frontier bordello. The action sequences are especially impressive, with Fredianelli and cinematographer Michael Martinez deftly handling a series of increasingly epic and complicated gunfights involving dozens of armed extras and countless squibs.

The Scarlet Worm is actually quite gory, and nearly every gunshot is accompanied by significant blood spatter. (There's also a fairly upsetting abortion sequence as well.) The only effects that don't quite pass muster are a couple of digital sequences that look too artificial against dusty backdrops.

As is the case with a lot of independent productions, the acting is uneven. Veterans Halsey and van Husen are in fine form—especially van Husen, whose bent view of religion and oddly practical notions about the sin of fornication make him a compelling villain. Also watch for a brief appearance (as a judge) from Michael Forest, who appeared in *Beast from Haunted Cave* (1959) and countless TV and European westerns.

Stielstra (who also wrote the excellent score) is good as the style-obsessed killer, but I found myself wishing he'd slow down his delivery a bit; this is a film that takes its time, and his monologues (and the delivery of several of the other younger players) just wasn't quite deliberate enough to match the pace set by the director and editor.

That said, *The Scarlet Worm* is a weird, compelling and engaging (if flawed) film that demonstrates just how much can be accomplished on a miniscule budget (reportedly around \$25,000). Fredianelli has already directed another four films since completing this one (including the horror anthology *Coin*), and it will be interesting to see what he and his cohorts can accomplish moving forward.

The Blu-ray / DVD includes trailers for *The Scarlet Worm* and other Wild Dogs productions, two informative commentary tracks (featuring Lambert, co-producers/actors Mike Malloy and Eric Zaldivar, and other cast members), and a nice little featurette about the making of the film.

Brian Albright