

THE DEVILS

Directed by Ken Russell
(1971) BFI IMPORT DVD

In 17th Century France, Loudon is a walled-off city that enjoys self-governance far away from the fey, grubby clutches of King Louis XIII (Graham Armitage). The king doesn't want France to become merely a succession of autonomous city-states, and so hatches a plan to end Loudon's isolation. Loudon is largely under the sway of Father Grandier (Oliver Reed in career-defining performance) who forthrightly questions celibacy forced upon the priesthood by sleeping with every possible woman he can. Evil, hunchbacked nun Sister Jeanne (Vanessa Redgrave in another career-defining role) sexually yearns for Grandier, and so conspires with Father Barre (Michael Gothard) to denounce him as the devil incarnate. Dozens of naked, hysterical nuns do a number of ungodly things in front of a bemused local populace, and Grandier is subjected to a grueling torture session before being burned at the stake. The walls come tumblin' down, and Sister Jeanne finally gets to jump Father Grandier's bones—in a newly restored scene, both literally and posthumously.

The year 1971 was a watershed time for British cinema, with Ken Russell's *The Devils*, Sam Peckinpah's *Straw Dogs* and Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* appearing within months of each other. All three reflected collaboration between British and American filmmakers—*Clockwork* and *Dogs* made by American directors working in Britain, Russell's *The Devils* funded by the American studio Warner Bros. All three films questioned the relationship between good and evil. All three used taboo-bursting sex and violence to make their points, but it was Russell's *The Devils* that added religion and politics into its heady brew. (*Clockwork* touches upon both religion and politics, albeit only briefly). As such, *The Devils* was severely mistreated on both sides of the Atlantic with arbitrary cuts and alternate versions. (*The Devils* enjoyed a far better fate than Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange*, however which was banned in the U.K. outright for more than 20 years!)

BFI has come to the rescue with a double-DVD set of *The Devils* that almost collapses under its own weight with extras, but sadly—it doesn't include a version as it was intended to be seen. *The Devils* two most notorious scenes—"The Rape of Christ" and the aforementioned scene where the sister consoles herself with "a souvenir" are included in all their glory in the excellent "Hell on Earth" 2002 documentary, but not in the context of the gorgeously restored version.

"The Rape of Christ" scene, wherein hysterical nuns tear off their habits, run naked to brazenly flaunt their naughty bits, then tear a huge crucifix off a monastery wall in order to rub against a statue of Christ, is not as shocking as many insist. It is an essential scene, as it is intercut with Father Grandier taking communion in a rural setting to take on the armor of Christ to do battle with his enemies, rendering a sequence utilizing everything in its power to be blasphemous—not blasphemous. This reviewer is rather struck by how the images in this scene recall the absurd dance routines that Russell featured in his G-rated musical comedy, *The Boy Friend*, which he directed the very same year! Rather, it is the editing rhythms with rapid zooms in and out coupled with shock cuts that make the scene overwhelmingly intense. It's not out of line to suggest that the staccato editing style could induce epileptic seizures or heart attacks in some viewers, and was left on the cutting room floor over safety concerns.

Topping the list of extras is the aforementioned "Hell on Earth" documentary, which includes the two deleted scenes as well as interviews with both Russell and surviving cast members. Led by film scholar Mark Kermode, both censors and filmmakers recall the fracas surrounding the film. One lady extra recalls that all the actresses who played nuns were given a sheet of paper explaining what was expected of them—and if they disagreed, they should go home! The documentary ends with Kermode, Russell and cast members retiring to Russell's rural cottage to watch the film once more, their reaction being mostly . . . "Is that all there is?"

There is a brief two-minute introduction from Kermode, and a lively audio commentary with Russell, Kermode, longtime Russell editor Michael Bradsell and Paul Joyce. The commentary points out many of the talented hands at work. Derek Jarman is praised for his futuristic, stark white brick sets, giving *The Devils* the look of a science-fiction epic. The costumes by Shirley Russell are also worthy of note. (This reviewer suggests that the artificial look of the art direction and costume design aids the audience with a degree of detachment from the grisly violence and ugly truths presented in the film.) "Director of Devils" a 22-minute promotional piece from 1971, has candid comments from Russell as well as Sir Peter Maxwell Davies conducting his unique, nails-on-chalkboard musical score.

There is also onset footage with Michael Bradsell commentary. There is an onstage question-and-answer conversation with Russell conducted by Kermode that was shot in 2004. There is the original U.K. trailer as well as the U.S. trailer for the *The Devils* ("The Devils . . . is not for everyone!" warns the stern-voiced narrator of the U.S. trailer) On top of everything else, there is a profusely illustrated booklet on the film. The most avid fan of this film will leave this set utterly satiated.

The one surprise extra presented on the discs is the early Ken Russell short, "Amelia and the Angel," a black-and-white silent film with narration and musical score. Aimed at children, the film tells the story of a precocious little girl who can't resist taking home her angel wings prior to her dance recital. Warned by her teacher that if the wings are damaged in any way, she will not be allowed to perform—the wings are predictably damaged beyond repair. All seems lost until Divine intervention arrives from a real angel, and Amelia is able to rejoin her friends. Sweet and cheerful, "Amelia" it is the polar opposite extreme of *The Devils*, until one takes into account that spirituality, redemption and Christianity runs throughout all of Russell's films—albeit films that conservative clergy would be hesitant to endorse.

Greg Goodsell

THE SCARLET WORM

Directed by Michael Fredianelli
(2011) Uearthed 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.

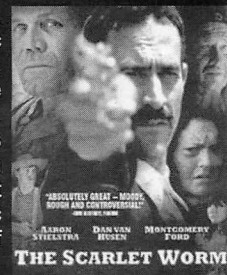
The Scarlet Worm is actually quite gory, and nearly every gunshot is accompanied by significant blood spatter. (There's also a fairly upsetting abortion sequence as well.) The only effects that don't quite pass muster are a couple of digital sequences that look too artificial against dusty backdrops.

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