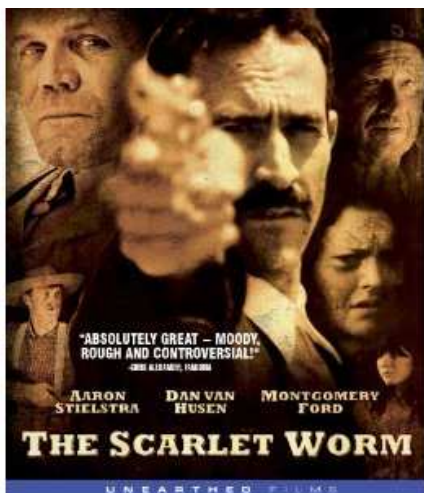




BLU-RAY REVIEW: "THE SCARLET WORM": ...

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BLU-RAY REVIEW: "THE SCARLET WORM": INDY FILMMAKING AT ITS BEST



By Lee Pfeiffer

When I received an unsolicited screener of a new film called *The Scarlet Worm* from Unearthed Films, I let it languish for weeks. Finally, primarily because it is a Western, I got around to viewing it. It's a gritty, grim affair that ranks among the best independent movies I've seen lately. However, I was curious about the cast members because, as talented as they are, I had not heard of any of them. The reason why became clear when I looked at the "making of..." extras on the Blu-ray. Incredibly, this ambitious movie was put together by a team of virtual strangers who met each other on-line. They conceived of the plot and shot the movie on such a low budget that they had to live in an abandoned house that had been foreclosed by a bank. When viewed from this context, *The Scarlet Worm* is an even more impressive achievement. The film centers on an immoral hired gun named Print (played by film critic Aaron Stielstra, who also provides the film's atmospheric score). Print fancies himself the protector of everything moral in the small, remote desert community in which he lives. He arbitrarily decides lives and dies, and much of his killing is done for pay under the instructions of local cattle baron, Mr. Paul (Montgomery Ford), who wants Print to assassinate a bordello owner named Kley (Dan van Husen), ostensibly because he forces his whores into undergoing barbaric abortions. However, there is a more personal reason for Paul wanting the "hit" to take place. This sets off a virtual war between Paul and Kley that involves an eclectic number of eccentric gunslingers on both sides. *The Scarlet Worm* may sound like an old Roger Corman horror

flick, but the title actually has an intriguing meaning that becomes clear in the course of the film. The movie, very well-directed by Michael Fredianelli, draws upon imagery from any number of old Western classics ranging from the works of Peckinpah and Leone to Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven*. The film doesn't stint on brutality and some of the sequences, particularly involving the crude abortion practices, are hard to stomach. Yet, Fredianelli successfully paints a convincing picture of the hard scrabble life on the American frontier, where lives could be snuffed out on a whim. The production team does wonders in compensating for the low budget and manages to provide some very professional and convincing set designs and costumes. The crew also doubles as actors. The most notable performances are those of professional veteran thespians like Ford and van Husen, who have film credits dating back decades. Both are in top form, finally having been awarded leading roles. Stielstra makes for a mesmerizing and highly complicated villain. Lanky in build with a Wyatt Earp look, Stielstra's Print is an unnerving figure-charming one moment, murderous the next. There are also some fine performances by the women who play the abused hookers, with Rita Rey a particular standout. It should be noted that the actresses don't shy away from appearing fully nude in the movie, but it never comes across as gratuitous. Instead, it presents frontier prostitution as a grimy world where women's lives depended on the whims of the men who routinely used and abused them. The Blu-ray looks first rate and contains a "making of" featurette, as well as various trailers for the film. There are also some trailers for productions members of the cast and crew are involved with. The team also has a slasher film out there, but it looks like a waste of their talents to produce yet another gruesome Texas Chainsaw Massacre-style movie. Instead, their production company, Wild Dogs Films, should set their sites on more lofty goals such as *The Scarlet Worm*. It's an

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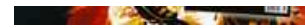
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