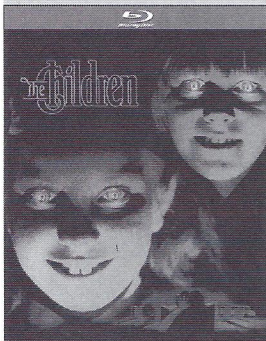


THE CHILDREN

Directed by Max Kalmanowicz
(1980) Vinegar Syndrome Blu-ray/DVD



Vinegar Syndrome rescues another regional horror film from the otherwise ill-kept Troma library with *The Children*, a killer-kids flick conceived by future *Luther the Geek* director Carlton J. Albright (no relation).

When a very small busload of children is exposed to a cloud of toxic radiation (released

after two nuclear power plant employees fail to notice a leak in their haste to get to the local watering hole), they are turned into murderous zombies who can incinerate unsuspecting grown-ups by literally hugging them to death. As the local sheriff (Gil Rogers) and other adults search for the missing tykes, the adult population of the small town is significantly reduced. The sheriff and the father of one of the missing children (Martin Shakar) eventually have to fend off the evil kids while trying to protect Shakar's pregnant wife (Gale Garnett).

As far as killer kid movies go, I've always had a soft spot for *The Children*, both because of their unique method of killing their victims, and the relatively threadbare production value of the film. While a great deal of effort went into making the children appear as creepy as possible (there's even a scene that clearly copies the "vampire at the window" bit from *Salem's Lot*), they appear to be having a blast—in some scenes, it's clear they can barely keep a straight face while welcoming their co-stars to their doom.

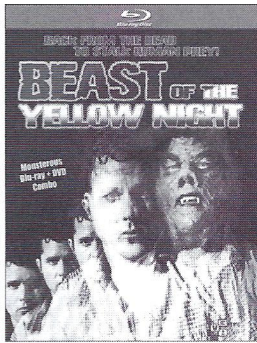
Co-writer and producer Edward Terry (who got bumped from directing this film because of his alcohol problems) went on to star in Albright's *Luther the Geek* (1990). Gil Rogers was a longtime regular on the soap operas "All My Children" and *The Guiding Light*. The cast also includes busy character actor Peter Maloney (*The Thing*), Martin Shakar (*Saturday Night Fever*), and Carlton Albright's kids as two of the zombie children.

A number of crew members from this film went on to Sean S. Cunningham's employ on the original *Friday the 13th*. One of those was composer Harry Manfredini, who essentially plagiarized his work on this film to compose the memorable score for his initial Camp Crystal Lake outing. Other future *Friday* alum include cinematographer Barry Abrams and production manager David Platt (who worked on *Friday the 13th Part 2*).

The Children was previously released on disc by Troma, which used a chintzy, full-frame transfer. The new Blu-ray from Vinegar Syndrome has been scanned and restored in 2k from the original 35mm negative and some 35mm prints. The film, presented at 1.85:1, thus displays some varying quality from sequence to sequence depending on the source material, but the overall presentation is sharp.

The disc includes an audio commentary with director Max Kalmanowicz (moderated by Vinegar Syndrome's Joe Rubin) and another by Albright (a holdover from the Troma DVD). There's also a new video interview with Albright and production manager Platt, a tour of the shooting locations with former *Fangoria* editor Michael Gingold, a 3-minute audio sequence from a lost scene, and some archival interviews (also from the Troma DVD) with Albright, Platt, Gil Rogers, and Patricia Albright. Stan Richardson, who created a musical adaptation of *The Children*, is interviewed in another featurette.

Brian Albright



BEAST OF THE YELLOW NIGHT

Directed by Eddie Romero
(1971) VCI Entertainment Blu-ray/DVD combo

Eddie Romero and Kane Lynn's Philippines-based Hemisphere Pictures started out shooting jungle combat war pictures, figuring the authentic rain forest locations of Romero's home country would prove more visually exciting to viewers in overseas markets than typical Hollywood soundstage potted plant jungles. What they didn't count on was the fact that filmgoers in the U.S. were not particularly interested in low budget war flicks at all in the mid-60s, and their first couple of efforts completely fizzled at the box office. Not discouraged in the slightest, they regrouped around a genre which WAS selling tickets at the time and scored a series of international hits in the late

60s with locally-produced horror flicks that featured mad scientists, deformed creatures, a sometimes surprising amount of gore and a smattering of island girl nudity.

The most famous of these pictures formed the infamous "Blood Island Trilogy"—*Brides of Blood*, *Mad Doctor of Blood Island*, and *Beast of Blood*. The good-looking, ambiguously Elvis-like John Ashley stars in all three, although only in the last two does he play the same character. The trio of pictures, along with a couple of other related productions, did quite well in the U.S. and other markets, but despite the success, or more likely because of it, the partnership fell apart after 1970's *Beast of Blood*. Ashley then formed a new production company called Four Associates, secured the invaluable services of Romero (who actually handled most of the writing, directing, and day-to-day producing on the pictures) and struck a distribution deal with Roger Corman's New World Pictures, which was about to descend on the island nation to begin shooting its own series of *Women in Prison* movies.

The first new Ashley/Romero production was *Beast of the Yellow Night*, a convoluted, sometimes confusing tale of reincarnation, demonic influence, monster attacks, gory gut munching, and marital strife. After playing the hero of the last several pictures, Ashley here takes on the more challenging role of Langdon, a rogue World War II soldier with a vague history of murder and mayhem on his record who makes a pact with Satan to receive eternal life in exchange for eternal servitude.

Playing Satan here is Filipino-sploitation stalwart, Vic Diaz who must have appeared in every film made in his home country during this period. Typically, he was cast a leering women's prison guard, or some kind of henchman or thug, so playing the soft-spoken and crafty Lord of Lies was probably as much as a departure for him as playing a desperate killer was for Ashley. Diaz keeps his performance unexpectedly low-key, employing an amusing, sarcastic tone that calls to mind Mr. Miyagi in *The Karate Kid*. Langdon and Satan also seem to have a complex master/student relationship and spend more time debating metaphysics and the nature of good and evil than you would expect in a Filipino monster movie.

The arrangement between the pair seems to involve Langdon possessing or reincarnating in or otherwise inhabiting the bodies of unfortunate people down through the years and forcing them to do bad things. This gives Langdon his eternal life and helps Satan corrupt a bunch of souls. By 1971, though Langdon, has begun to repent both his own evil ways and the damage his bargain has caused in the lives of others. When he finds himself in the body of Phillip Rogers, a good man with a loving wife and brother, he can take no more. After attempting to talk the baffled pair into hooking up and running off together, apparently in a bid to distance them from his evil influence, Langdon begins to actively resist Satan's call to evil. Satan's response to this rebellion, predictably enough, is to bestow a werewolf-ish monster curse on Langdon, who then roams the countryside in hideous make-up, killing against his will. From there, the picture essentially becomes a werewolf movie with an Inspector who suspects the beast's true identity hot on his trail. I won't spoil things by revealing whether Langdon finds redemption for his sins at the end.

Horror fans who don't insist on a completely coherent plot or on characters who actually behave like real people may find a lot to like in *Beast of the Yellow Night*. Ashley really throws his back into the monster performance and also performs capably as the perpetually conflicted Langdon. His creature make-up hits the sweet spot between cheap and grotesque, making it actually quite effective in combination with Ashley's snarling histrionics and the queasy gore which accompanies each kill.

While Diaz and Ashley definitely carry the picture, seasoned Canadian actress Mary Wilcox adds some badly needed character support in her role as Julia, the wife of Langdon/Rogers who is utterly at a loss as to what the hell is happening with her husband, but is determined to help him through it. Although her character, as written, comes across as rather clueless at times (although, who wouldn't be, in this scenario?) she still manages to convey naturalistic feelings of concern and affection for her husband without veering too far into melodramatics. Not exactly a household name, Wilcox nonetheless enjoyed a thirty-year acting career, consisting mostly of one-off roles on various U.S. TV series. By the 1980s, she had transitioned to comedy and appeared regularly in assorted SCTV-related projects. Ashley continued splitting his time between acting and producing, remaining active in the Philippines long enough to do some work on *Apocalypse Now*, before decamping back to the States and spending the rest of his life as a producer for series *The A-Team* and *Walker, Texas Ranger*. Diaz, of course, remained in the Philippines, performing in well over 100 films until his retirement in 2001.

Beast of the Yellow Night has received a number of home video releases over the years, often from prints in rough shape. The Retromedia Special Edition DVD issued several years ago provided the best version to date, with a relatively sharp, clean picture and a modest collection of extras that included a documentary about Ashley and some stills and trailers. For those interested in a hi-def upgrade, VCI/MVD's 2019 Blu-ray release takes the ball and runs with it, presenting a new 2K scan of the 35mm negative that looks to be a noticeable improvement over the Retromedia version.

To sweeten the deal, the release includes a generous selection of extras that highlight the label's determination to treat the picture with respect, rather than package it as a "cheezy drive-in flick," as is often done with films of this ilk. Historians Howard S. Berger and Nathaniel Thompson appear on a highly informative commentary track, while Berger also provides printed liner notes. The disc also sports a selection of interviews with subjects like Eddie Romero, Sid Haig, Eddie Garcia, and others familiar with the Filipino film industry of the 60s and 70s. Finally, we get the John Ashley documentary from the Retromedia release and some trailers and TV spots. The package also includes a DVD version of the release.

Chris Herzog