Chuck Connors never asked for your pity. That said, one can’t help but catch the simplest whiff of off-camera tragedy surrounding his star turn in 1979’s TOURIST TRAP today. The headliner of such ’60s television Westerns as BRANDED had gone on record saying he accepted the role of demented Mr. Slausen in hopes of becoming the “Boris Karloff of the 80’s.” Watching Connors rave and rage through the film is to see a leading-man-in-decline struggling to reinvent himself on screen, a Tinseltown phoenix fighting to rise up from his own celluloid ashes.

Sadly, that kind of career re-ignition wasn’t in the cards for Connors, which makes TOURIST TRAP something of an interesting what-if scenario for horror fans to ponder. *What if* Connors had been able to reinvent himself into a character villain for the Reagan era, a Betamax Basil Rathbone parading through the ’80s in one iniquitous role after another? Move over, Robert Englund. THE RIFLEMAN is gunning for your spot…

Luckily for us, however, Connors’ turn in TOURIST TRAP produced one of the more memorable second-tier slasher films of the period. Let there be no doubt: This is one unnerving movie.

Having originally conceived the movie as his graduate thesis project at the University of Texas (under the title THE SPIDER WILL KILL YOU), first-time helmer David Schmoeller, along with co-writer J. Larry Carroll, spins the well-worn yarn of a trio of buxom honeys (including future CHARLIE’S ANGEL Tanya Roberts) road-tripping through Texas (as played by the outskirts of Los Angeles), only to stumble upon the long-forgotten pit stop “Slausen’s Lost Oasis.” Time hasn’t been kind to Mr. Slausen’s low-rent roadside attraction, which best resembles a malevolent rendition of the Magic Kingdom’s “It’s a Small World” ride as assembled by Ed Gein, complete with animatronic dummies that seem a little more lifelike than they probably should. It isn’t long before mannequins start to move on their own, and that delicate line between reality

and madness begins to blur.

What is so singular about TOURIST TRAP is that it isn’t singular at all. Its originality is less in its forging through any uncharted narrative territory, but rather its symbiosis of other horror benchmarks from the surrounding era into one utterly batshit storyline. Who wouldn’t want to see a movie that merged the telekinesis of CARRIE, the psycho-artisan-gone-bonkers of HOUSE OF WAX and the brutal psychological dismantling of a poor waif of THE TEXAS CHAINSAW MASSACRE all into one jambalaya of a movie? It’s Schmoeller’s seamless blending of all of these disparate elements that’s truly amazing—and what ultimately saves TOURIST TRAP from being considered derivative. Because hiding behind its T&A posturing is a well-crafted rabbit hole of a third act that argues for its place within any horror devotee’s personal DVD collection.

TRAP corrupts its audience’s sense of reality. Schmoeller makes a jolly time out of meddling with his “final girl” Molly (Jocelyn Jones) much the same way as Tobe Hooper tampered with his own heroine Marilyn Burns in the original CHAINSAW. Where these two directors diverge, however, is that while Hooper unflinchingly permitted audiences to witness the agony of madness from the outside in, Schmoeller takes his viewers down a subtler, oddly gentle, path, slipping them unknowingly into Molly’s mind as she descends into her own personal psychosis. This shift in perception is practically…imperceptible. By the time the audience is aware that they have lost their grip on what’s real and what isn’t, much the same way as Molly has, it’s too late.

Is that a person—or just another mannequin?

Is that the COWBOY IN AFRICA—or the Sarge from AIRPLANE II?

It should be said that Connors gives it his all, delivering a performance that even Karloff would’ve been proud of. It takes a certain type of actor to pull off a role whose predominant scene partner is a mannequin head. Try it sometime. Not that the talent was only in front of the camera; the pedigree on this production is stupefying. Schmoeller assembled a topnotch crew that included assistant director Ron Underwood, who would eventually go on to direct cult fave TREMORS. Before bringing this mannequin-infested oasis to life, production designer Robert A. Burns had also toiled on CHAINSAW (as well as THE HILLS HAVE EYES)—and the aesthetic sensibilities seemed to carry over.

But the biggest feather in TOURIST TRAP’s cap is Pino Donaggio, composer of such classics as Nicolas Roeg’s DON’T LOOK NOW, Joe Dante’s THE HOWLING and PIRANHA and Brian De Palma’s CARRIE, BLOW OUT and DRESSED TO KILL—just to name a humble few. Mainly comprised of sighs and other choral distortions, Donaggio’s chilling score is something akin to Meredith Monk meets Ted Bundy. Even after the end credits have rolled, there’s just no getting those voices out of your head.

{jcomments on}