

“GAMERA VS. BARUGON” (DVD Review)

Written by Michael Gingold

Wednesday, 14 July 2010 15:44



A rubber-suited-monster franchise is an unlikely place for a sequel to improve on its original, but that's what happens with GAMERA VS. BARUGON. And Shout! Factory's new DVD finally allows its qualities to stand out for American viewers, following the cropped and dubbed version released to television by Sandy Frank Productions in the '80s and '90s and, before that, the cropped, dubbed *and* edited cut syndicated in the '60s and '70s by AIP-TV as WAR OF THE MONSTERS.

Conceived as an A-picture follow-up to the success of the B-level, black-and-white production GAMERA, THE GIANT MONSTER, BARUGON was shot in glorious color by cinematographer Michio Takahashi (whose credits included no less than HIROSHIMA MON AMOUR). Previous director Noriaki Yuasa was put in charge of the special FX unit, with the more experienced Shigeo Tanaka taking over at the helm. The result? A more mature work of filmmaking than its predecessor, albeit one containing long stretches without any monster mashing; title star Gamera is offscreen for one section comprising nearly half of the 100-minute running time! Having escaped from the spacebound rocket he was trapped inside at the end of the first movie, the titanic turtle does get to cause a spectacular dam disaster before making himself scarce, at which point the human plot takes over.



This involves a trio of acquaintances trekking from Japan to an island near New Guinea in search of an opal that one man's brother had hid in a cave decades before, during WWII. (Occasional references to the war give BARUGON a minor historical context missing from the first GAMERA.) One of the trio, Onodera (Koji Fujiyama), turns treacherous, steals the opal and hightails it back to Osaka, but thanks to misapplied infrared radiation intended to cure Onodera's athlete's foot (don't ask...), the gem hatches, releasing a cute li'l lizard that very quickly grows into the city-smashing Barugon. Not just a threat due to its size, Barugon can also spray a freezing mist from its chameleon-like tongue *and* project a destructive rainbow from its back spines! Will Gamera, who can just breathe fire, be a match for this new enemy?

“GAMERA VS. BARUGON” (DVD Review)

Written by Michael Gingold

Wednesday, 14 July 2010 15:44

Perhaps aware that the answer to this question is a foregone conclusion, Tanaka and screenwriter Nisan Takahashi de-emphasize the creature combat (the two giants only tussle twice in the film) in favor of Barugon’s solo shock and awe and the attempts by hero Keisuke (Kojiro Hongo), joined by island girl Karen (Kyoko Enami), to assist the military in destroying the new attacker, while Onodera continues to cause trouble on the sidelines. The drama is earnestly played, Takahashi’s moody cinematography (richly replicated in the DVD’s 2.35:1 transfer) does wonders and the monster material, largely set at night and lensed with equal atmosphere by Yuasa, is the best in this series. Barugon, despite a number of shots revealing the suit performer crawling on his hands and knees, is easily the most plausible threat Gamera ever faced, before the franchise gave way to outlandish beasties often filmed in unflatteringly bright light.

Japanfans August Ragone and Jason Varney are properly appreciative of the film’s virtues on their commentary track—perhaps overly so, praising certain shots and FX even more than they warrant. And they spend a great deal of time exhaustively recounting the filmographies of practically every member of the BARUGON cast and crew (Fujiyama, for example, was the Japanese voice of James Bond), which can seem commendably thorough or time-consumingly gratuitous depending on your point of view. But there’s no denying they know their stuff, revealing all kinds of arcane facts and trivia about the movie (developed from a previous outline called GAMERA VS. THE ICE MEN, in which the threat was alien invaders); they’re even able to note discrepancies between Takahashi’s early script draft and the final release version. It’s a shame that, despite their hopes voiced during this commentary, Ragone and Varney are apparently not returning for Shout!’s future Gamera titles, to be released as double-feature discs.

In the course of their completism, the duo occasionally quote outside sources—including an interview with Hongo also reprinted in a booklet packaged with the disc, in which the actor admits his initial reticence to star in a monster flick, to the point of feigning illness for an entire month! Also on the supplemental platter are a gallery of black-and-white stills and color behind-the-scenes shots of the miniature/FX shoot; a smaller gallery of posters and promo cards; and a complete reproduction of the original theatrical release program, containing images from not only BARUGON but its Daiei co-feature DAIMAJIN as well.

MOVIE: 🍷🍷🍷👤

“GAMERA VS. BARUGON” (DVD Review)

Written by Michael Gingold
Wednesday, 14 July 2010 15:44

DVD PACKAGE: 🍅🍅🍅👤

{jcomments on}