

“THE DEADLY SPAWN” (Blu-ray Review)

Written by Jeremy Webster

Friday, 24 February 2012 14:58



Elite Entertainment’s new Blu-ray release of the low-budget 1983 alien splatterfest THE DEADLY SPAWN should be cause for celebration. Please note, I said “should be”...

With a budget in the area of 25 grand, this brainchild of producer Ted Bohus, FX technician John Dods, writer/director Douglas McKeown and art director/executive producer Tim Hildebrandt (of Tolkien and STAR WARS illustration fame) should be a real treat as a prime example of early-'80s aliens-and-gore ingenuity. Basically, the story follows a group of teenagers stuck at home during a rainstorm who find themselves trying to keep from being eaten by meteorite-born sharp-toothed mouths on stalks. Along the way, most of the adults around them meet untimely, ghastly gross-out endings as they wind up food for the spawn, and a sequence where a vegetarian social gathering comes to a screeching halt as smaller baby critters sink their teeth into the attendees is a laugh riot for all the right reasons.



THE DEADLY SPAWN is, of course, nowhere nearly a perfect film, and it suffers from the same problems as a lot of shoestring-budget do-it-yourself horror films. There are continuity errors and instances of questionable acting or dialogue, and the occasional effect or prop or puppet might not be as convincing as something you’d see from Stan Winston’s heyday. It’s important to note, though, that even Sam Raimi’s immortal EVIL DEAD (which opened at the same time) has plenty of issues in these areas, and largely rises above the pack thanks to its

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absolutely relentless pace, wildly inventive camerawork and over-the-top violence and gore. THE DEADLY SPAWN doesn't have Raimi's insane visual sense or pacing, but, as a creature feature from this era that was more than willing to heap on the gore, it's fun, inventive and has some pretty wicked splatter FX along the way, not to mention an instantly memorable monster.

In 2003, Synapse Films released a definitive DVD edition of THE DEADLY SPAWN, and this still readily available release maintained the company's track record of high quality. Now Elite has stepped up to the plate with a Blu-ray release in its “Millennium Edition” series, which, in the past, has included DVDs of the restored NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD, Stuart Gordon's RE-ANIMATOR, and the notorious rape-and-revenge saga I SPIT ON YOUR GRAVE. Why Elite decided to call this a “Millennium Edition” 12 years after the relevance of such a designation isn't clear, but since the Blu-ray is essentially competing with Synapse's DVD, I suppose every marketing tweak helps. In fact, while both editions have suggested retail prices of \$19.99, Elite's disc is a dollar cheaper than Synapse's on Amazon. At this point you may be thinking, “Why *wouldn't* I snatch this up?” Don't be hasty. Come along, dear reader, for that dollar you think you're saving now might have been one you'd eagerly spent had you known the facts about Elite's release.

At first glance, both discs have fairly similar special features. Both have the same alternate opening, blooper and outtake reel and “A Visit With the Deadly Spawn” featurette. Both have extensive photo galleries, with Synapse's being the viewer-controlled type while Elite opted for fade-transition slideshows. Both include audition and casting footage, with Elite's being about 20 minutes longer since there's a lot of additional footage of Bohus, John Dods and a lady whose identity eludes me goofily rehearsing various scenes. Both editions sport a theatrical trailer, with Elite's throwing in a television spot as well.

Each edition has exclusive features: In Synapse's corner we have a Filmmakers' Biographies section where you can learn more about the lives and careers of McKeown, Hildebrandt, Bohus and Dods, as well as production assistant/future filmmaker Tim Sullivan. Elite gives us a compilation of local news spots and an episode of a New Jersey call-in talk show that goes on for roughly 45 minutes, and a 24-minute episode of a filmmaking series called TAKE ONE in which editor Marc Harwood is interviewed. All of these features on the Blu-ray seem sourced from VHS, and none—including the extras previously mentioned—are in high definition. While this vintage stuff adds about an hour of extra material over Synapse's package, only the most die-hard and obsessive fans are really going to appreciate the sheer mass of it.

In an odd twist, both discs contain completely different comic-book prequels. Synapse's DVD features a short, music-accompanied prologue explaining more or less how the Deadly Spawn

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ended up on Earth, while Elite’s Blu-ray offers a number of sample pages of what Bohus intends to be an eventually commercially available DEADLY SPAWN prequel comic. Neither one challenges the EC legacy, but if you like this sort of thing, you’ll probably find these to be fun little diversions.

Synapse’s DVD has two audio commentaries: one with McKeown, Dods, Sullivan, Hildebrandt and the latter’s son Charles, who plays heroic, horror-film obsessed younger brother Charles, and one with Bohus all by his lonesome. Neither of these appears on Elite’s Blu-ray, which instead features an entirely new talk track by Bohus and Harwood, with no one else involved in the production represented. As if this wasn’t enough to make Synapse the obvious winner in this category, Elite’s commentary sounds as if it was recorded with a poor microphone and the volume settings too high, resulting in a very loud, sometimes painfully trebly audio that shouldn’t be listened to at higher volume unless you enjoy punishing your ears. As far as audio in general goes, Synapse’s is a Dolby Digital 2.0 mono presentation that, while nothing remarkable, serves its purpose just fine. The Elite Blu-ray’s LPCM 2.0 audio isn’t noticeably any better, so those for whom audio upgrade is a major purchasing factor will be disappointed.

And now, friends, we’ve come to the part of this review where I feel like I have to step a bit beyond the role of critic and play consumer advocate. If you were excited about the opportunity to get THE DEADLY SPAWN in glorious high definition to add to your library, I’d advise you to forget those hopes and dreams right now, because what Elite has gone to market with here is nothing short of enraging.

THE DEADLY SPAWN was shot on various qualities of 16mm film throughout production. As a film, it has grain. Pause most any decently lit scene on Synapse’s DVD, and you’ll see it. Elite’s Blu-ray transfer (in the correct fullscreen aspect ratio, as was Synapse’s), however, is another victim of digital noise reduction overuse. There’s almost no visual grain, and, as is to be expected, many images end up softened, with fine detail vastly reduced or eliminated in the process. Actors look like they’re made of wax. As if that wasn’t horrible enough, comparisons between better-lit scenes in the two releases reveal that Synapse’s now nine-year-old DVD actually has superior image and detail quality to Elite’s brand new Blu-ray. Both versions sport the same print damage throughout the running time, meaning both came from the same print source, but the fact that the Blu-ray detail is worse than the DVD’s leads me to question whether there was an HD transfer for this release at all, or whether the same digital master used for Synapse’s DVD was simply upconverted to the format, whereupon they DNR’d the hell out of it.

Obviously, quality control wasn’t a huge consideration either, as there’s a complete audio and

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video dropout at 1:15:06 on the Blu-ray that isn't present on the DVD, suggesting that Elite duplicated a poorly engineered master that either nobody bothered to check or nobody cared to correct for need of hurrying the product out the door. They even manage to add insult to injury by including a short but grating introduction from Bohus, who seems to be trying to do the sort of comedic intro Lloyd Kaufman inserts before Troma's films, but failing at it entirely.

So, how much does that dollar difference mean to you now? Sure, you get some extra bonus video from cast and crew, and various TV programs you'll dig if you're a big fan, but in trade you're losing an entire commentary track with a ton of the principal people whose blood, sweat and tears went into making the film. Nothing against Harwood, but is this a reasonable trade-off? Even more pertinent, do you really want to pay your hard-earned money for a Blu-ray whose very claim to that media designation is little more than a mockery of the term?

THE DEADLY SPAWN deserved far better. Hopefully, Bohus will see this, realize the wrong that's been committed here and take his film back to Synapse...or anywhere that will give it proper HD treatment. Sure, he might have had some OK stuff sitting around on VHS to round out the extras a little more, but the name on the cover is THE DEADLY SPAWN, not THE DEADLY SPAWN'S SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL, and had I actually paid my hard-earned money for this overly DNR'd thing that looks substandard to the DVD that came years before, I would be immensely angry. Even if you still want this new release just to add the extras to your collection, I urge you to stick with Synapse's edition, if for no other reason than to simply send Elite the message that this sort of substandard care will not be tolerated by the marketplace. If you truly love films like this, this is a good chance to fight for them via your wallet.

MOVIE: 🍌🍌🍌👤

BLU-RAY PACKAGE: 🍌👤👤👤