

“DARK NIGHT OF THE SCARECROW” (DVD Review)

Written by Samuel Zimmerman
Tuesday, 30 November 2010 13:53



For many horror fans, DARK NIGHT OF THE SCARECROW is a treasure, a shining example of an era of quality made-for-TV genre films. For others, it was a source of frustration—a film they’d constantly heard was great, but worried they might never get to see. Now—and surprisingly late, considering all the other less worthy flicks that have found their way to DVD—those audiences (including myself) have been able to experience what’s been held up so high for so long, thanks to VCI’s DARK NIGHT DVD. But was it worth the wait? Is DARK NIGHT only something wonderful in the distant memories of those who watched it long ago?

No! While it may not be exactly what you expect from the movie that basically created the killer-scarecrow subgenre, DARK NIGHT is terrific. It’s the tale of Bubba Ritter (Larry Drake), a gentle, mentally challenged man whose best friend is young Marylee Williams (Tonya Crowe). After a horrendous accident in which the town believes Marylee had died, Otis Hazelrigg (Charles Durning) rounds up a lynch mob to bring Bubba to justice, assuming he’s responsible. Otis, Skeeter (Robert F. Lyons), Philby (Claude Earl Jones) and Harless (Lane Smith) find Bubba hiding in a scarecrow and open fire, brutally murdering him—only to quickly find out he had actually saved the child’s life. The four are acquitted of murder and allowed to carry on their lives, while Marylee and Bubba’s mother wallow in sadness at the loss of their friend and son. That is, until Bubba’s bloody scarecrow starts ominously appearing in the farms of those who slayed him.



DARK NIGHT OF THE SCARECROW is without doubt a scary film, but not because of its titular monster. For smaller viewers, I imagine the scenes of creeping fear as the scarecrow stalks are highly effective, but as an adult, the terror derives from one man: Durning. Otis Hazelrigg is one of the most despicable, monstrous and blatantly evil men ever put to celluloid, and Durning is terrific in the role, instilling intensity, deception and an astounding creepiness behind Hazelrigg’s eyes. Even the simplest lies, such as his refusal to drink, seem more grossly horrible as his true intentions are revealed. And no villain would be complete without a massive amount of repulsive sweat, with Durning’s glands seeming to rival those of Joe Spinell.

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Surprisingly cinematic, with wide crane shots and long '70s-era pan-outs, DARK NIGHT owes much of its stellar aesthetic qualities (captured in the disc's good-looking transfer) to director Frank De Felitta, cinematographer Vincent Martinelli and editor Skip Lusk. The three make the most of every shot, getting true frights without much explicit material, but through juxtaposition or just excellent composition. Early on, when Marylee is attacked, we're shown “reaction shots” of a garden of lawn gnomes—which, while creepy in their own right, takes the sequence to a new level of intensity, hammering home the disturbing nature and helplessness of the situation. There's no shortage of similar standout moments, like the transition from Harless' gruesome death in a woodchipper to Otis' fine breakfast, or even just Otis glaring at the town's Halloween party through the eyes of a skeleton mask, cementing his ghoulish persona.

Unfortunately, SCARECROW's triumphant home release isn't as celebratory as it probably should be. The lone major disc supplement is an audio commentary by De Felitta and scripter J.D. Feigelson, which isn't as full of intriguing and amusing anecdotes as one might hope. It's a fairly tame track, with plenty of pauses and mostly observatory comments, detailing exactly what you're seeing on screen instead of offering lively backstory or anything of that sort.

Despite this bummer, DARK NIGHT OF THE SCARECROW itself remains absolutely worthy of its classic status, having aged beautifully and surviving as a highly effective and spooky pioneer.

MOVIE: 🍎🍎🍎🍎

DVD PACKAGE: 🍎🍎🍎🍎

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