Written by Chris Alexander
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As the ’60s became the ’70s and pop culture began to change, cinema was perhaps most affected. Old studio moguls either died or were put out to pasture, television began bridging the immediate cultural gap and the landscape was changing. In post-McCarthy, post-JFK-assassination and pre-Vietnam America, movies like BONNIE AND CLYDE, THE GRADUATE and EASY RIDER were rapidly bending the rules and giving voice to younger, angrier and more innovative talents, paving the way for a more permissive MPAA.

In Britain, Hammer Films, known throughout their history for walking the line of good taste in their combination of sexuality and bloodletting, exploited both their own changing of the guard (Michael Carreras took over from his father James) and the more liberal U.S. ratings board and began unleashing Gothic romps that absolutely wallowed in exposed flesh and gruesome death. Some purists balked at this crass new trend, but viewed from the distance of decades, this period produced some of the studio’s most daring and fascinating works—stuff like THE VAMPIRE LOVERS, DR. JEKYLL AND SISTER HYDE, DEMONS OF THE MIND, TWINS OF EVIL, LUST FOR A VAMPIRE and SCARS OF DRACULA. But among that lot, the strangest—and perhaps best—was director Robert Young’s truly unique and distinctly erotic VAMPIRE CIRCUS.

Out now in a handsomely packaged Blu-ray/DVD combo pack from Synapse Films, VAMPIRE CIRCUS has stood the test of time. The film begins years before the central action takes place, with a horde of angry Austrian villagers infiltrating the lair of hyper-handsome and sadistic sex vampire Count Mitterhaus in the midst of a sort of erotic undead initiation rite. As Mitterhaus is put to the stake, he decries, through bloody, clenched fangs, a curse upon the villagers and promises that he will one day return.

Flash forward decades later. The village is in tatters, never having fully recovered from the waste laid by Mitterhaus. Until one day, when a traveling carnival comes to town, full of color and exotica. Problem is, each and every one of the troupe’s members—including the animals!—is a bloodsucking vampire. They’re disciples of the dead Mitterhaus, banding together to fulfill the curse and kill off the guilty locals and their progeny one by one.

Like many of the latter Hammer films, VAMPIRE CIRCUS is somewhat flawed, due in no small part to budgetary restraints and because, frankly, as Gothic horrors were becoming commercially passé, the studio was unsure about what sort of product they were delivering. It jumps around a bit. It feels somewhat choppy, unrefined, searching for a tone. But after a few viewings, you accept these peculiarities. They become part of the picture’s greatness, and rest assured, it is a great horror picture. Brimming with energy, pulsing with the grandiose strains of David Whitaker’s grim score and filled with darkness (there’s an uncomfortable child-abuse element in the opening and running throughout the film that is disturbing and cruel), VAMPIRE CIRCUS is kinky, quality entertainment.

Synapse has taken great care in restoring VAMPIRE CIRCUS in high-definition, 1080p widescreen, and the Blu-ray image positively pops with color and texture. The anamorphic DVD transfer is almost as good, and the picture probably never looked this alive, even during its initial theatrical screenings. Hammer fans should be pleased by simply having the film in their hands, but Synapse goes the distance, providing a wealth of bonus material including a smashing documentary called “The Bloodiest Show on Earth.” It features Hammer experts Tim Lucas and Ted Newsom, filmmaker Joe Dante and co-star David Prowse (Darth Vader himself)—along with Fango contributor Phil Nutman—jawing about the special place VAMPIRE CIRCUS holds not only in horror history, but the hearts of the Hammer faithful. There’s also an interesting little featurette about the history of “circus horror,” Nutman et al. returning to rhapsodized about the late, beloved House of Hammer magazine, a freaking cool VAMPIRE CIRCUS motion-comic book, tons of color stills and the original theatrical trailer. Kudos to Synapse for also using the gorgeous, bizarre original theatrical poster art for the cover image. Wild stuff.

If the words “Hammer” and “horror” put together make your pulse race, you’re going to require this splendid edition of this superlative dark-fantasy classic on your shelf.

MOVIE:

DVD PACKAGE:

For more on VAMPIRE CIRCUS, see Fango #299, now on sale.

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