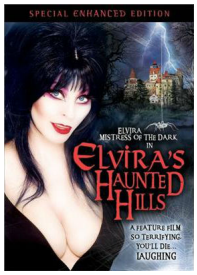
Written by Trevor Parker
Friday, 28 October 2011 08:30

Here we are, on the cusp of another October 31st, and the usual seasonal indicators are out in full force: bulk candy on sale, paper skeletons taped to front doors, horror movies airing on network television (sanitized for your protection, of course) and the annual resurgence of the Queen of Halloween, Elvira. In addition to dual-episode DVD's of her revived MOVIE MACABRE program out on store racks, she of the naturally unnatural proportions has also re-released her second feature film, 2002's ELVIRA'S HAUNTED HILLS (E1 entertainment), just in time to perk up our favorite horrific holiday.



HILLS finds a mid-nineteenth century Elvira schlepping her way through the Carpathian mountains to Paris in time for the opening night of her new stage extravaganza. With her rotund French handmaiden Zou Zou in tow, Elvira hitches a ride with a mysterious coach that drops her at the imperious castle estate of Lord Vladimir Hellsebus (Richard O'Brien of THE ROCKY HORROR PICTURE SHOW) to spend the stormy night. Lord Hellsebus is a recent widower, and his dearly departed bride just so happens to bear an uncanny resemblance to Elvira. Backed by the strains of a surprisingly luxurious score from Eric Allaman, Elvira swells up her considerable charms in order to solve the mystery of the Hellsebus family curse, all while swooning over a heroic stable boy (whose dialogue is intentionally dubbed in the haphazard style of many a cheapie Euro fright flick), and arriving to her Parisian debut on time and in one piece.

Unlike her first feature ELVIRA: MISTRESS OF THE DARK, which took place in a modern setting, HILLS makes the interesting choice to drop Elvira into a locale similar to those of the period movies she often hosts; specifically the pasteboard-castle gothic of Roger Corman's loose Edgar Allan Poe adaptations. HILLS is one big affectionate, nostalgic swipe at that series of films, right down to the psychedelic tendrils of paint swirling behind the opening credits as in 1961's THE PIT AND THE PENDULUM. Corman's films were not exactly known for their understated dialogue or the measured restraint of Vincent Price's lead performances. HILLS amplifies these elements with some absurdly overwrought acting of its own, and a deliberately nonsensical plot. Top it off with pratfalls, mugging, cartoon sound effects, inexcusably corny puns and you get a sort of humor that's a lot like sauerkraut; not everyone will enjoy it and those that don't end up with a sour taste in their mouths. HILLS' farce is so broad it makes YOUNG FRANKENSTEIN look like a mumblecore exercise, so higher brows should approach

with caution. Elvira is game as always, and it's hard to deny that her talents extend beyond the two more ostentatious ones always on ready display. Her trained comedic timing breathes life into HILLS' routine schtick and stale vaudeville gags. (This reviewer can't be the first to compare Elvira's sharp line deliveries to those of Carol Burnett?) It doesn't exactly save the movie, but it surely energizes it.

E1's reissue comes with a handful of outtakes, sample interstitial skits from the new MOVIE MACABRE, and a photo gallery. Richard O'Brien's worryingly befuddled rambling during a solo on-set interview clip means that he's either putting one over on the interviewer, or perhaps in early stages of dementia. There's both a vintage and all-new 2011 making-of featurette, along with a cast and crew commentary track. Seems generous enough, but the problem is that many of the same anecdotes (mostly centering on experiences while shooting HILLS in the economically enticing but comparatively unrefined country of Romania) are repeated in all three of these and get old fast.

While it's always nice to see Elvira stretching her legs and unconfined to TV show sidelines, ELVIRA'S HAUNTED HILLS is a weaker, cheaper companion to her first movie and is hampered by the kiddie-level capering. It's tough to imagine her hardcore fanbase would be disappointed, so in that respect HILLS is maybe not quite a recommend, but hardly an outright bust.

Movie: 💀💀💀💀

Disc Package: 💀💀💀💀