

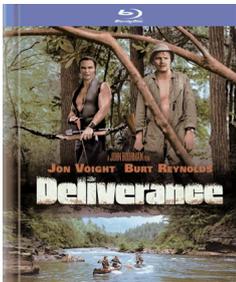
“DELIVERANCE” (Blu-ray Review)

Written by Trevor Parker
Friday, 13 July 2012 10:57



The '70s must have been a rough time to be a travel agent. Just as JAWS had millions hurriedly kiboshing their beach vacations and MIDNIGHT EXPRESS had people rethinking tours to exotic locales, the brutal and affecting DELIVERANCE would for years elicit the same hesitation about jaunting into the wilderness.

The plot of DELIVERANCE (recently reissued in a special Blu-ray book edition from Warner Home Video) has four friends from Atlanta, Ed (Jon Voight), Lewis (Burt Reynolds), Drew (Ronny Cox) and Bobby (Ned Beatty), arriving in Georgia's hill country to paddle down the Cahulawasse River, a waterway soon scheduled to be dammed and dried forever. After an idyllic launch, the group soon run very afoul of some predatory hill-folk, and our urban interlopers find out just how deeply they're capable of sinking in order to survive.



For fresh eyes journeying into DELIVERANCE in 2012, it's got to be difficult not to have preconceptions about the names in the credits. Try to forget Reynolds' fallback persona as a smirking, toupeed wiseacre in a string of idiotic car-chase movies, director John Boorman going on to slip his studio leash and concoct the most ridiculously, operatically overblown sequel in genre history (EXORCIST II: THE HERETIC) and Voight as simply, "Hey, isn't that Angelina Jolie's Dad?" DELIVERANCE is every inch an American classic; it's the original backwoods survival-terror film, and its repercussions can be felt in every subsequent hillbilly horrorshow, from THE TEXAS CHAINSAW MASSACRE all the way up to the woeful WRONG TURN franchise. In fact, DELIVERANCE's ugly stepchildren often replace the film's classy restraint, wrenching dramatics and ambiguous plot points with cheap scares and rubber masks.

This only adds to the understated creepiness when revisiting Boorman's effort. Sparse, spare and shot on gorgeously genuine locations in rural Georgia, DELIVERANCE needs no

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overbearing or contrived production design to accentuate the feeling of isolation and vulnerability as the friends undertake their doomed voyage downriver. The hillbillies, both friend and foe, are all the scarier for their authenticity (Boorman used actual locals as many of the extras). As explained in the Blu-ray’s accompanying booklet, the film’s famed “banjo kid” was given light makeup around his eyes to achieve his unique, off-kilter look (picture Radiohead’s Thom Yorke if born in an Appalachian coal shed) but otherwise was left largely as he was. Imagine today’s Hollywood interpretation of the material—no doubt we’d have stuntmen’s faces plastered with prosthetics, their mouths loaded up with snaggletoothed dental appliances.

The oppressive quiet of the deep woods and the powerful roar of the rushing river underline DELIVERANCE’s almost complete absence of score (Boorman says on the disc’s commentary that this was done primarily as a cost-cutting measure). Only the cheery nine-note melody of “Dueling Banjos” follows the group, and for a time, it was an anthem just as synonymous with fear as the cello scrape of John Williams’ JAWS music. Boorman’s unobtrusive direction makes DELIVERANCE his career highlight by quite the gaping margin, and the same can be said for most of the cast members (with perhaps the exception of Voight’s turn as Joe Buck in MIDNIGHT COWBOY). This especially holds true for Reynolds, who never got close to being as good as he is as the athletic and magnetically reckless Lewis. Even James Dickey, author of the source novel and the screenplay, acquits himself well in his small role as the sheriff—a rare example of a writer who can actually act (for an example of the opposite, see Stephen King in any number of his clumsy cameo appearances).

This Blu-ray release is meant to commemorate the film’s 40th anniversary, and comes with a decent platter of extras. We get a ported-over documentary, entertaining enough, and one that repeats many of the same stories Boorman relates in his commentary track. New and exclusive to this edition is a cast reunion, filmed at the Burt Reynolds Museum (!). This featurette has the now-elderly quartet reminiscing on pretty much the exact same anecdotes from the documentary and the commentary, but the obvious love and mutual respect the four men display toward each other is so engaging that viewers are bound to forgive a little redundancy.

The hi-def transfer is clean and appears to not have digitally tampered with the film (a noticeable strand hair still floats around the lens during one quick underwater shot). It does have distracting variations in brightness, owing to cinematographer Vilmos Zsigmond’s reliance on natural lighting, and it could cause you some blinking or rubbing of eyes after scene transitions. High definition is also unkind to the brief day-for-night scene, with shots of Jon Voight scaling a cliff under a hideous purple lens filter—but hey, it was the ’70s. The best part of this release is the luxurious hardcover-book packaging, featuring behind-the-scenes photos and quotes printed on heavy paper stock. It’s a keeper.

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DELIVERANCE is, at its soul, a movie about war; it's hard to overlook that Vietnam was at full rage at the time of the film's release. There is the battle of the group vs. the hillbillies on the surface, but the film also explores the quartet's conflict against the natural world, and their own civilized, domesticated natures while under serious duress. Granting that, it's long past due for the horror community to also embrace DELIVERANCE as one of our genre's touchstones. (The booklet describes the movie as an “adventure thriller.” Really?) Anyone doubting the film's impact on the vocabulary of cinematic terror has only to imagine the more innocent audiences of 1972, shocked to their cores as they discovered that Ned Beatty could indeed “squeal like a pig” during DELIVERANCE's most harrowing violation.

MOVIE: 🍌🍌🍌🍌

BLU-RAY PACKAGE: 🍌🍌🍌🍌