

PHANTASM III REVIEW

PHANTASM III: LORD OF THE DEAD

Review by Daniel Schweiger - Excerpted from Fangoria Magazine

" Where most films would rein themselves in, Coscarelli has done the reverse, making this the wildest **Phantasm** entry of all."

Horror's most consistently inventive franchise only proves to be more imaginative with each installment. *Phantasm III: Lord of the Dead* is a hellzapoppin sequel that viscerally expands the mythos of the silver sphere, peeling open more of the horrific universe that only director Don Coscarelli seems to have the guidebook to. Like a magician pulling rabid bunnies out of his hat, Coscarelli unveils a series of creations that run the gamut from cyclopean spheres to pissed-off zombies and kinky sex dreams. Best of all, every performer who made 1979's *Phantasm* so believably off-the-wall is back, including Michael Baldwin as a grown-up Mike, Bill Thornbury as his now undead brother Jody, Reggie Bannister as Reggie, the ice cream man turned troll-slayer and, not least of all, Angus Scrimm's Tall Man. This cast, along with the makeup wizardry of Mark Shostrom, transforms *Lord of the Dead* into a family reunion that's a horror fan's dream.

Shot for well under *Phantasm II*'s budget, the third effort makes up for its low cost with a thrilling flair that rivals any studio film. Setting up this sequel's originality with a vengeance, Coscarelli rudely annihilates the last movie's female lead and dispatches the memories of James Le Gros' Mike with Baldwin's clever body doubling. But far from the lame and bloody damn-the-past expositions of a Freddy or Jason film, *Lord of the Dead*'s opening is a natural continuation of its predecessors. With the Tall Man pulling new bodies for himself out of the dimensional closet, the heroes narrowly duck flying evil at every turn. The surprises are endless as *Lord of the Dead* breaks down the barriers between horror and science fiction, mingling Lovecraftian creatures with alien technology.

With so much insanity going on, Coscarelli doesn't bother to keep a straight face. There's a twisted sense of playfulness to *Lord of the Dead*, and the expansion of its myths is always just short of ridiculous. One of the spheres is even friendly, possessed by Jody's spirit and determined not to follow the Tall Man's orders. The tortures that the beneficent ball goes through are hilarious, as is the E.T.-like bond between the sphere and Michael. Yet Coscarelli is wise enough not to mess with the Tall Man, who remains a commanding and deadly serious force amidst the film's craziness. With a larger amount of dialogue than in the past two films, the Tall Man is more myth than ever, controlling the characters' fates like a gruesome master of ceremonies.

There's not much plot to this latest *Phantasm*, and its blissed-out go-with-the-viscera-flow spirit is akin to a '60s road film. Once again, Reggie and Mike hit the Oregon sticks to track down the Tall Man, always just one gas stop behind his plundered cemeteries and decimated towns. Along the way they pick up a miniature Rambo (Kevin Connors) who could give *The Road Warrior*'s feral kid a run from his boomerang, as well as a warrior woman (Gloria Lynne Henry). As the game cast runs from one hellish mausoleum to the other, the real suspense is if Reggie will ever bed the vigilante, or if Mike will understand what the hell Jody's talking about when he isn't in sphere form. *Lord of the Dead* has great fun making the story up as it rolls along.

While Coscarelli gives the fans what they want, consistently pulling off brain-blowing FX, and provides tantalizing explanations for the Phantasm series' wackiness, he leaves the key answers to our imaginations. Where most films would rein themselves in in this direct-to-video age, Coscarelli has done the reverse, making this the wildest Phantasm entry of all.

But what ultimately makes this movie work so well is its cast's joyful sense of crudeness. There is no Hollywood sheen to Bannister's Reggie, perhaps horror's most unusual leading man. With a receding hairline and hippie attitude, he comes across as a Deadhead who's been forced to kick zombie ass, when all he really wants is to get laid. Bannister is fun, earnest and always believable. Baldwin and Thornbury make welcome returns from the acting Twilight Zone, while Henry is a sexy delight as the ninja wannabe. Finally, Scrimm is a mellower if no less menacing Tall Man, slipping into the hoarse-voiced role with the ease of Vincent Price putting on his dinner jacket.

Familiarity is the final key to Lord of the Dead's success, from Scrimm's twitching eye to the eerie synthesizer notes of Fred Myrow's score. Just as the first film redefined how original horror could be, Lord of the Dead casts a hypnotic if more frenzied spell. The sequel's bigger-and-better inventiveness makes it not so much a sequel as a Necronomicon on acid, its chapters endlessly flipping open for daring readers.

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