

## Fango Flashback: "SILENT NIGHT, DEADLY NIGHT III: BETTER WATCH OUT" (1989)

Written by Brian Collins

Monday, 24 December 2012 13:55

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Ask anyone about the SILENT NIGHT, DEADLY NIGHT series, and they will probably laugh, then either defend it or decry it, possibly offering the same examples to back their pro or con stance ("It's awful, it has a killer Santa!"/"It's *amazing*, it has a killer Santa!"). But they might be surprised to discover that the series has five installments (six with the recent remake), as it's the sort of title that a lot of people know but haven't actually sat down to watch, let alone follow it to direct-to-video land with the bulk of its sequels (only Part 2 played theatrically, and barely at that). It didn't help that the lesser known entries were given a poor release on DVD via Lionsgate, who dumped VHS transfers of the third, fourth, and fifth installments onto a multi-pack of bare-bones discs and slapped a killer Santa image on the cover, despite the fact that none of the films contained within featured a killer Santa.

Of the three, I find SILENT NIGHT, DEADLY NIGHT 3: BETTER WATCH OUT! to be the most curious entry, and also sort of an anomaly in the series as a whole, because it's the only one that's not really mean-spirited and borderline sleazy. Furthermore, it's the last time there would be any attempt at continuity; the killer is once again Ricky, the villain of the second film, albeit this time played by genre fave and veteran character actor Bill Moseley. Obviously this is a vast increase in talent; going with Moseley instead of bringing Eric Freeman back is akin to opting for a fine steak over a five day old Arby's meal. Ricky is now a brain damaged killer who somehow survived being shot (in the chest) multiple times in the previous film and has been in a coma (we see his medical chart, which reads "Diagnosis: Coma") ever since. And for reasons not completely (or coherently?) explained, he's got an exposed brain, protected by a salad bowl and some electronic doohickey, and lumbers around not unlike Karloff's Frankenstein (Boris actually appears in the film thanks to a clip from *The Terror* shown on a TV), saying only the name of the heroine until the film's closing shot.

The heroine is Laura (Samantha Scully), a blind girl who also has some psychic abilities, and is being used by an opportunist psychiatrist in an experiment that has her sharing dreams with Ricky. The shrink is played by Richard Beymer, who along with Eric DaRe as Laura's brother makes this movie a must-see for TWIN PEAKS fans, especially considering that the film was released long before PEAKS went on the air (David Lynch fans can also enjoy MULHOLLAND DRIVE's Laura Harring as DaRe's girlfriend). In fact, you can easily claim that this entry has the best cast in the lot. While most of them offered a name or two, they certainly didn't offer a cast full of familiar faces—every principal actor here is someone recognizable (Robert Culp also pops up as a cop on the trail of Moseley's killing spree).

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Anyway, on Christmas Eve, Laura and her brother are on their way to see their grandmother, and are on their way when Ricky awakes and escapes, killing a few folks along the way and somehow getting there before they do. It's a bit slow for a while, but the final reel or so kicks things up a notch, taking on a sort of home invasion feel as Ricky stalks/chases the three of them, with Laura's blindness adding to the tension. Oddly, it features the same idea as the same year's HALLOWEEN 5, which is that the killer and the young heroine can see what the other one sees (at least, when the plot calls for it). Also, the heroine in each film has a disability (Jamie in HALLOWEEN 5 had become mute, if you recall) and is traumatized by the death of a close relative. Obviously it's just a coincidence, but it's interesting to note that the fifth film in this series was seemingly taking a page from HALLOWEEN III, as the villain was a demented toy maker



On that note, perhaps inadvertently, the SILENT NIGHT series ended up taking on the "anthology" idea that was planned for the other franchise, before HALLOWEEN III's box office failure drove producers back into Haddonfield for good. Even though this is the same killer as Part 2, it's a completely different type of film, barely even registering as a slasher given the low body count (some of which are off-screen) and without a shred of that film's warped sense of humor and total trash appeal. It's not without some funny business—there's a fun bit about Culp trying to get Beymer on his cell phone plan so he can get some money off his next bill, and Ricky's head-gear never stops looking silly enough to chuckle—but if you remove all preconceived notions about the series and skip the first few minutes where the connection is made, you'd be forgiven for thinking that this was a straight up, stand-alone thriller. And the next two films were fully unrelated, merely using Christmas setting as a backdrop for a variety of stories that didn't fit the slasher model at all. By the end, it had truly become an anthology series of unconnected films, though Clint Howard (!) did appear in both parts 4 and 5 as a character named Ricky, but they appear to be different characters and neither of them seem to be related to this one, just to make things more confusing for the series' fans (and by that I mean, me).

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Another thing that sets this apart from the others is that it's directed by arguably the best filmmaker in the series history: Monte Hellman, whose film *TWO-LANE BLACKTOP* was just entered into the National Film Registry, something that probably won't happen for this or any other *SILENT NIGHT, DEADLY NIGHT* film. I'm not sure how Hellman, who only made one other film in the decade (the revenge flick *IGUANA*, starring Everett McGill, another future *TWIN PEAKS* star!), got roped into directing the second sequel to a trashy horror flick, but it certainly explains A. the better grade of cast and B. the film's slow pace and lack of the series' trademark bad taste sleaze, as his other films were also slow and on the more dramatic side of things (he was also one of the several directors on *THE TERROR*, which explains its "cameo" here). It probably didn't do the film any favors at the time (it has the lowest audience score of the five films on Rotten Tomatoes), but I kind of dig that while it may not be a satisfying SNDN movie, it's still in line with the other Monte Hellman pictures.

So if you can find the 3-disc set, or still have a VCR kicking around, give this or one of the other late sequels a look this holiday season if you've already experienced the first two more than any sane person should. *THE INITIATION* (Part 4) is directed by Brian Yuzna and features a lesbian cult and some insane Screamin' Mad George FX, and *THE TOY MAKER* (Part 5) has a demented Mickey Rooney (as a character named Joe Petto - not joking) and an androgynous, murderous android named Pino. They have their merits, and again are a little more in line with the first two entries in that they seem to be made by people who absolutely hate Christmas. But if that trashiness is too much for you and you want to know what a "normal" *SILENT NIGHT, DEADLY NIGHT* movie is like, *BETTER WATCH OUT* has got you covered.