

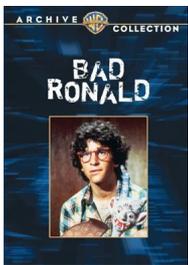
## Fango Flashback: “BAD RONALD”

Written by Clay McLeod Chapman  
Saturday, 29 May 2010 09:31

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*Mother knows best.* Especially if you're gawky Ronald Wilby (Scott Jacoby)—who, on his 16th birthday, accidentally crushes a little girl's skull on a cinderblock and hastily buries her body in the shallowest of graves. Mom's solution? Wall Ronald off in the spare bathroom of their house, sealing him in with plaster and gaudy floral-print wallpaper so that the police will never find him.



Warner Bros. has been blowing the dust off its back catalog for its manufactured-on-demand Warner Archive DVD line, which has been a blessing for hardcore horror fans—among other titles, the 1974 TV movie *BAD RONALD* was finally made available on disc. In the teleplay by Andrew Peter Marin, based on the novel by John Holbrook Vance (or Jack Vance, as his legion of sci-fi fans know him), our titular homebody is Anne Frank by way of Norman Bates, confined spaces and mommy issues intact. Director Buzz Kulik transplants this suburban version of the *Bates Motel* into a sunny '70s subdivision, letting the film's *PSYCHO*-sexual mother-son relationship play itself out in the house just next door.

Crisis momentarily averted, Mom (Oscar-winner Kim Hunter, sans Brando or monkey makeup) seems pretty content to have Ronald all to herself now. If only her damn gall bladder would stop acting up. Mom makes a quick trip to the hospital, only to wind up in the morgue—leaving poor Ronald buried within the walls of his own home. Alone. And with no mother around to curb his increasingly depraved behavior, Ronald winds up doing some bad, bad things.

It's not long before a new family moves into the Wilby residence, led by patriarch Dabney Coleman (complete with patented mustache), utterly unaware that the previous owner still refuses to move out. A handy manual drill is all it takes to litter the house's walls with more holes than a block of Swiss cheese, permitting Ronald the perfect view of his new housemates—mainly 13-year-old Babs, the youngest of three Brady-girl clones, who inadvertently stirs up some of Ronald's more uncultivated cravings.

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Given the necessary prime-time prudence, Ronald’s perversions are rather chaste in comparison to his cinematic forebears (Norman Bates, PEEPING TOM’s Mark Lewis, BLACK CHRISTMAS’ Billy). He is still, after all, just a kid—which does provide a fresh (for the ’70s, at least) perspective on the mother-infantilized-murderer tropes that have atrophied as the standard slasher m.o. in the decades since (FRIDAY THE 13TH, THE FINAL TERROR, MOTHER’S DAY, etc). More of a malevolent Harry Potter than a man-child mass murderer *à la* Michael Myers, Ronald sublimates his sexual desires into his own self-devised, saccharine sword-and-sorcery fantasia called “Atranta.” This dreamland comes complete with its own convoluted, Tolkien-esque backstory, where Ronald casts himself as the knight in shining armor to Babs’ prepubescent princess. We watch Ronald’s alternate narrative slowly unfold through a series of PRINCE VALIANT-inspired murals etched along the walls of his suffocating cubbyhole, proving how wholesome sexual obsessions can be. At least on network television.



It isn’t until these two worlds begin to blur in Ronald’s mind that two-dimensional fantasy will no longer suffice—and RONALD grows its teeth. Fans of Bob Clark’s aforementioned classic BLACK CHRISTMAS, released in theaters the same year, might find a certain cinematic kinship with BAD RONALD in theme and occasional execution—particularly the eerily similar optic shots of their stalkers peering out from behind closed doors, providing each movie with one of its most dread-inducing moments.

But what separates RONALD from most proto-slasher films of the ’60s and ’70s is its rooting of the story within the ostensible monster’s perspective, granting its audience a certain sympathy-for-the-devil viewpoint that is not only chilling, but solicitous of our sympathies as well. We can’t help but ultimately feel sorry for Ronald. A victim of his mother’s overbearing upbringing, his unnerving circumstances—and, ultimately, his own lack of comprehension when it comes to his contorting libido—Ronald is the most heartbreaking of monsters: a human being first, a monster later.

An effective riff on the haunted-house subgenre, complete with a psychoanalysis-for-network-television spin, BAD RONALD’s ghost isn’t dead—he’s alive and well and watching you through the walls of your own home. Did I say your home? Sorry. I meant his. As far as Ronald’s concerned, this is still his house. And the production’s restraint (i.e., extreme budget limitations) allows the fundamental terror to simmer in the psyche of every

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5-year-old who was (un)lucky enough to catch this kitsch-fest on the boob tube when it originally aired back in 1974: *Those noises in the walls aren't mice. There's a stranger in your house and he's got his eye on you right now...*

Go ahead and cry for your mommy now, kid.

{jcomments on}