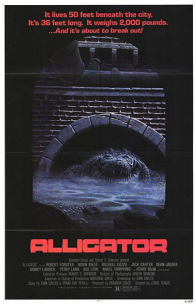
Celebrating its 30th anniversary this summer, Lewis Teague’s ALLIGATOR is a brilliant example of the post-JAWS eco-horror subgenre where a natural threat becomes the enemy of the people. This was a successful and much-loved breed of cinema during the ’70s and early ’80s, as all matter of beasts preyed on mankind; from a bear in GRIZZLY to dogs in THE PACK to a killer whale in ORCA, Mother Nature running amok was a surefire way of getting in the crowds and pleasing horror fans everywhere.



In Teague’s film, the urban legend of alligators living in sewers is brought to life in a smart, sophisticated fashion. Everything about this film is pure gold, as all the elements come together to make for one of the wittiest creature features of the 1980s. The story begins at a tourist trap featuring live gator shows, where young reptile enthusiast Marissa purchases a baby gator to keep as a pet. Her animal-phobic father decides to flush the poor critter down the toilet, letting it loose into the catacombs of an underground Midwest city sewer system. Years later, severed body parts keep turning up in local waterways, and Marissa (now a grown woman and the country’s leading herpetologist) helps local Chicago police officer David Madison uncover the sinister reasons behind the multiple deaths.

What they soon discover is that wealthy tycoon Slade, who’s in cahoots with the local mayor, is behind a series of growth-hormone experiments to tackle the world’s food-shortage problem. Slade has his top scientists experimenting on dogs, and the canine carcasses have been thrown into the sewers, only to be devoured by one hungry gator. What results is a massive reptilian mutation with an endless hunger that only David and Marissa can tackle.

The screenplay, penned by John Sayles (PIRANHA, THE HOWLING), is a sharp, socially aware monster masterpiece that comments on environmental decay, the dangers of science

and class resentment. Sayles, clearly having fun with the genre, is always armed with a witty joke to tail-end each scene. An example of the script’s ingenuity is a great setup in which the bomb eventually employed against the pesky oversized alligator is used earlier in the film by a delusional but ultimately harmless schizophrenic to threaten the police station in a rather comical scene. A Sayles trademark of sorts has much of the information about the monster and its path of destruction doled out to the audience and protagonists via news coverage in quick, sharp segments; this is also used in PIRANHA and is a major plot device in THE HOWLING, providing fun commentary on the role of the media and its own evils. Sayles epitomizes the latter in a scene where eager-to-make-a-buck wannabe entrepreneurs peddle alligator-themed souvenirs even as their neighbors are being eaten alive!

The cast does a great job, delivering unpretentious and dynamic performances. Led by Robert Forster as the no-nonsense cop with a tortured past (he can’t shake off the memory of his gunned-down old partner back in St. Louis) and Robin Riker as the sassy, feisty herpetologist, the ensemble also boasts some great character actors who make this romp even more fun. Sydney Lassick (the English teacher who gets electrocuted in CARRIE) plays a dodgy pet-shop owner who’s made shifty deals with the scientists, while Henry Silva is arrogant bounty hunter Col. Brock; both meet bloody ends.

The deaths throughout are both bloody and beautifully black comic: A neighborhood baseball game is interrupted by a savage attack where the gator tears a police officer apart; at a children’s party, a young boy is forced by his peers to leap off the diving board into a backyard swimming pool where the scaly fiend is hiding; a SWAT team takes to the water to shoot the hungry beast, only for one to have his legs shredded off; and in the best sequence of all, the rampaging monster eats the rich at Slade’s daughter’s wedding. The gator itself is a knockout of hybrid invention: in some scenes a mechanical creation that chomps unfortunates and uses its mammoth tail to thrash folks about, with an awesome presence and scale; in others footage of an actual specimen crawling through miniature sets in all its reptilian glory.

To the casual observer, this movie may seem to be nothing more than yet another monster-on-a-rampage flick to add to the popcorn junk pile, but it is most definitely better than that and commands respect. Teague (who went on to the equally superlative CUJO) and Sayles have come up with a tightly written, intelligent film that will always be a classic to fans of the genre and anyone with good taste.

Happy 30th birthday, ALLIGATOR; you ain’t long in the tooth at all!

{jcomments on}