As veteran horror-film viewers, FANGORIA fans are exposed to endless monsters that come in endless forms. Corpses, sharks, blobs and even an ill-tempered Plymouth Fury can wreak havoc on screen, and fans will not only accept them but cheer for more. But a tree monster? I can safely say that FROM HELL IT CAME showcases the first tree-monster I have witnessed on screen.

To clarify, I don’t mean the angry apple-hurling sort from THE WIZARD OF OZ, the rape-y branches in THE EVIL DEAD, or the “taunting the young ’un” tree in POLTERGEIST. This is an actual tree monster—by which I mean a tree that walks around and attacks people, even chasing them down (well, kind of, but I’ll get to that in a second). Let me start at the beginning of FROM HELL IT CAME…

The year is 1957, and for the “good” of our nation, the ol’ USA has been dropping radioactive bombs over the South Pacific. A group of scientists are hanging out on a rural South Sea island, observing the effects of the radiation on the natives and trying to help these folks by reinforcing that America’s modern hi-tech scientific way is much better than their pitiful island culture and backward religions.

The film’s action (and I use that word loosely) begins when the island’s prince refers a family member to the scientists for medical assistance. The tribe persecutes him for siding with the enemy. In one of the most boring death scenes in cinematic history, the prince is executed with a knife to the heart and then buried in a hollow tree. This cues a lengthy and very stereotypical choreographed hula dance, followed by a tropical drum solo. How ethnic!

Meanwhile, back at our modern science lair, the doctors are continuing to help some of the locals, who are sneaking away from the pack to seek out Western medicine and experimental chemical cures. Reports start coming in of a strange tree rising out of the ground. Enter Tabonga—tree reincarnate of the executed prince, which is now roving about the island and slowly avenging his death…very, very slowly.

There is one problem with buiding a film around a marauding killer tree: Trees were never meant to move. They don’t have the capability for rapid travel, and in this 1950s man-in-giant-rubber-tree-suit flick, the monster moves almost as slowly as the plot. Sure, trees can look scary; we all have childhood memories of that one in the backyard that had that weird, evil face in the bark, almost gargoyle-like in its features. The filmmakers were obviously trying for something similar here. But what appears on screen looks like a grumpy and sleepy 80-year-old man who has lost his dentures and is shuffling very slowly around a jungle-like soundstage searching for them.

Helmed by the Milner Brothers (who, not surprisingly, decided to make this their last film as a director/producer team), FROM HELL IT CAME is a beautiful example of ’50s atomic-age cinema. The fear of radioactivity and the uncertainty of the side effects ooze out of this film like glowing green tree sap. There also seems to be a hint of guilt about what “Old Glory” dropped on the South Sea natives. Too bad the filmmakers decided not to cast any of them in this film. Instead, FROM HELL IT CAME is filled to the brim with the whitest bunch of Polynesians this side of Central Casting. Buff Hollywood hunks drenched in light tanner speak slightly broken English to achieve that native look. Brown-haired, leggy chorus gals hula dance around with big Hollywood smiles and grass skirts. And strangely enough, all the natives wear the same pattern of fabric. It’s like the costume designer only had one bolt of standard Hawaiian hibiscus print, and had to construct an entire Polynesian island’s wardrobe out of it.

[redacted] Anthony Collectson [redacted]