Once upon a time, the promise of an unrated or extended cut was exciting. The advent of DVD and the attendant special features opened up a whole new world of rare behind-the-scenes material, excised bits and alternate takes we had only heard about. Now, more often than not, it’s simply a sham. Two more seconds of barely noticeable gore? Oh, cool.

Rarely does a home-video release offer anything of substance, and even making-of featurettes have become repetitive—usually 10 minutes of the film’s prominent players exclaiming, “The production and cast were the best ever” and “a dream come true” intercut with a few shots of the director looking pensive and thoughtful on set. Thankfully, the promised extended cut of THE WOLFMAN that hits DVD and Blu-ray June 1 from Universal isn’t just about extra blood spray, but a significantly longer version of the film, and one that’s a definite improvement.

While the theatrical cut wasn’t bad (I found myself a supporter of it), there was no shaking the huge problem with its pacing: namely, that it moved ridiculously fast, obviously leaving plot holes and the feeling that plenty was left to be seen. The discs contain both this incarnation and a version that adds a hefty 20 minutes or so, which greatly helps what needed it most: the rushed and undeveloped first act.

This update of THE WOLFMAN actually turns back the clock from the 1941 original (also included in the Blu-ray package), making the tale an English Gothic period piece, which is perfectly fitting and one of the movie’s best assets. Lawrence Talbot (Benicio Del Toro) returns home after an over 20-year absence to help investigate the death of his brother, console his late sibling’s fiancée Gwen (Emily Blunt) and reconcile his issues with his obviously deranged recluse of a father, Sir John Talbot (an out-of-control and awesomely entertaining Anthony Hopkins). Soon, poor Lawrence finds himself in the gypsy camp outside of town and the victim

of a werewolf roaming the countryside, whose bite in turn transforms him into a beast.

As stated earlier, the most noticeable change to the longer cut is in the first act, where the movie now gets a chance to breathe and fully introduce the characters and their sensibilities, not just the plot. In the expanded opening sequence, there’s a look at Lawrence and his life as an actor: Instead of sending a letter, his would-be sister-in-law Gwen attends one of his performances herself and tries to talk sense into the dismissive thespian amongst a host of backstage debauchery. After he finally concedes, Lawrence takes the railroad to his family’s estate, and along the way encounters a wonderful uncredited cameo by legendary actor Max von Sydow, which should never have been excised in the first place (and explains the previously mystifying credit for “assistant to Mr. Von Sydow” in the theatrical cut).

Von Sydow essays a mysterious man sitting across from Lawrence who offers worldly wisdom and actually gives the future Wolf Man his famous walking cane. After their conversation, Lawrence drifts off to sleep, awakening to find only the cane. The scene may ultimately be inconsequential to the overall picture, but it’s played extremely well—and, in making one question whether von Sydow’s character was real, truly sets up and adds to the dreamlike, surreal and fluid atmosphere the film is shrouded in. It also does a nice job of demonstrating the cursed quality of Lawrence and his family, and the idea that, whether he’s bitten or not, the beast may dwell within him regardless.

Much of the rest of the added material is small moments between characters or extended dialogue passages. It’s pleasing to see Blunt receive a modestly, but still welcome, larger role in the proceedings, and it also seems as if an already bloody movie has been made bloodier. The attack scenes are a bit more savage and greater in length—which, in a film that obviously revels in its excellent prosthetic FX, is a plus. The main story points and where they end up remain the same, and in the end, Hopkins and his twitchy, insane eye still make the movie all the more enjoyable.

All of this material does not a perfect movie make, however, and while I thoroughly enjoyed this take on THE WOLFMAN, it definitely still has its problems. In contrast to Shelly Johnson’s gorgeous cinematography and the fine makeup work by Rick Baker, the CGI doesn’t look like it will exactly age well in the coming years, and director Joe Johnston’s shifts in tone hurt the film as well. Most likely a result of Johnston signing on so late in the game (following original director Mark Romanek’s departure), there’s a certain awkwardness to THE WOLFMAN. All of the actors seem to be truly in love and having fun with their parts, and in the midst of the horror and Gothic enchantment of it all, a bit of dark comedy seeps through, which works just fine. What doesn’t work are many of Johnston’s shot choices; his extremely fast long-shot-to-close-ups

and silly jump scares give the beast a bit of a hokey feel at times. They’re also a bit too modern, and don’t assimilate well to the rest of the period story (at least in a film like this; they weren’t as awful in SHERLOCK HOLMES).

Accompanying the terrific-looking (1.85:1 widescreen) and -sounding (DTS-HD 5.1 Master Audio) extended cut on the Blu-ray are a host of features that make the disc an truly immersive experience and worth its price. A behind-the-scenes featurette admittedly lives down to the standards described earlier, but it’s the only supplement that falls flat. A segment on Baker and his contributions to the film is excellent, as is a piece that highlights the transformation sequences and the CGI/digital work; too bad it just kind of makes you wish they had let Baker handle the transforming as well.

There are three alternate endings, all of which only change the very last minute or two. One, which is definitely the darkest, ruins the tragic tone via one of Johnston’s silly ultra-fast character close-ups, making one understand why it wasn’t used. Another (SPOILER ALERT) is the same conclusion as the theatrical cut, just with Gwen and Hugo Weaving’s Inspector Abberline trading circumstances, concluding with Gwen staring forebodingly up at the moon. Most of the deleted scenes simply extend what’s already on view in the movie, most noticeably and substantially the Wolfman’s attack on London. The terrorized masquerade party hinted at in one of the early trailers is here, but doesn’t live up to the promise of its concept. In fact, it falls victim to hokiness, as the beast enters the ball intrigued by a singer and struts around while guests comment on how good his costume is. Once he turns wild, it’s over too quickly as he barely attacks anyone and just makes for the exit—leading one to think there was even more to this sequence that got excised.

While you’re watching the film, you can turn on something called U-Control, which is divided into two categories, Take Control and Myth, Legend and Lore. Certain scenes trigger this feature, and often the movie will briefly stop and someone involved in the production walks you through the creation of the scene at hand. The most interesting of these are the talks with cinematographer Johnson, who passionately discusses his lighting craft and his intentions for a given scene. Many of the visual FX segments in Take Control, on the other hand, are a bit repetitive if you’ve already watched the featurette on the subject. The Myth, Legend and Lore option contains a host of fun facts about the film and its relationship to werewolf mythology and other lycanthropic movies. It’s not vital information, but a light and welcome assortment of trivia.

Sadly, there’s a great big hole in the special features, and that’s the lack of an audio commentary. The Take Control feature is nowhere near a substitute, especially considering THE WOLFMAN’s long and tangled production and postproduction history. I was greatly looking

forward to Johnston weighing in on his extended edit and everything he faced when hired as director on such short notice, but it was not to be.

THE WOLFMAN probably could’ve been a great movie. Instead, we got “pretty good” and a host of replay value, which is worth commending in light of all it went through. The Blu-ray, like the film itself, may have its misses, but the good greatly outweighs the bad and, if nothing else, is worth a look to see what you missed in theaters.

UNRATED MOVIE: 💀💀💀🦴

BLU-RAY PACKAGE: 💀💀💀🦴

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