I guess ANIMALS did have an effect on me. Not a positive one—but, as with the movie’s protagonist, it brought out the animal within me. In my case, though, I didn’t transform into a powerful, emboldened, fearless wolf creature. Rather, I metamorphosed into a venomous snake—which should explain the forthcoming virulent criticism of this woefully regrettable film, which is best described as 9 1/2 WEEKS meets THE WOLF MAN. Oh, and if you don’t want to read a detailed breakdown of Marc Blucas’ buttocks, then proceed no further…

“They’ve been with us forever—prowling the smoky roadhouse dives that are their watering holes and hunting grounds. Predators, lurking amidst the human herd. Changing shape at will. Lusting for blood and meat. They are gods in the wild. Gods in disguise. And they feed on the spark inside each of us. Syd was just another lonely working class guy singing the dying steel-town blues. Then he met Nora. She’s sensual. Amoral. Erotic. Eternal. And she’s luring Syd across the line that few can cross…and even fewer survive: the line that separates man from the beast within. Animals. There’s a little bit of them in all of us.”

That’s the synopsis for the 1993 novel ANIMALS, by the former writing team of John Skipp and Craig Spector. The latter penned the script for the film, which hits no-frills DVD from Maverick Entertainment June 15. That’s three years after Fango’s ANIMALS set visit (which you can now read in Fango #294), which helps explain why the movie is lousy—and why director Douglas Aarniokoski took his name off of it (“Arnold Cassius” gets the, er, credit).

The film stars THEY’s Blucas as Jarrett (Syd in the novel), a former high-school sports star who was forced to return, tail between his legs, to his blue-collar industrial home town after getting injured in college. No longer self-assured and confident, the unhappy, insecure Jarrett works in a factory, drinks too much at the local bar and is generally dissatisfied with his life and the

direction it has taken. Things start to look up, though, when he meets and hooks up with Nora (JEEPERS CREEPERS 2’s Nicki Aycox). She’s sexy, likes to take risks and is defiantly dauntless. Her audacity helps to change Jarrett and restore him to his former fearless self. Her bite also helps “change” him—into one of a rare race of predators who represent the “line between man and animal.”

That, of course, comes with its share of problems. For one, Jarrett now craves human blood. For another, Nora’s ex Vic (LOST’s Naveen Andrews) wants Nora back, and he has no qualms about killing people, Jarrett included, to get what he wants. As Vic asks Jarrett, “You have no idea what you’ve stuck your dick into, have you?”

ANIMALS is one of those beast-inside-you stories in which the protagonist much choose between using his newfound powers for good or evil. No kewpie doll for guessing his decision. Handled competently and with cool creature FX, this could’ve been an OK movie. However, Aarniokoski or Cassius or whatever you want to call him colossally stumbles at the helm. Aarniokoski has worked as an assistant and 2nd-unit director, including gigs on Robert Rodriguez’s FROM DUSK TILL DOWN and THE FACULTY, and helmed one prior feature, HIGHLANDER: ENDGAME. In Fango’s ANIMALS article, Aarniokoski talks about how he, just like Rodriguez, operates the “A” camera: “I can get various takes in literally one shot, whereas that could take two or three hours if I was sitting at the monitor, trying to dictate to somebody 30 feet away who doesn’t know exactly what I’m looking for.“

Not to be too harsh, but judging from this movie, what Aarniokoski was looking for was a constantly moving camera and long takes that show as much lack of self-control as Jarrett himself. The mobile camerawork almost caused me motion sickness, and, combined with the ill-advised long takes, awkwardly makes evident Aarniokoski’s shortcomings as a director. The camera bobbles up and down, left and right, rotating and roaming around the actors and environments in an unpolished manner with no regard for composition. It’s distracting and entirely unnecessary—especially when the film switches to a static shot. (Note: In all fairness, Aarniokoski took his name off this film for a reason, and may not solely be to blame for the poor results.)

ANIMALS also has several bad slo-mo sequences as well as an unintentionally amusing scene of Evil Sayid, I mean Vic, roaming the nighttime neon casino streets of Reno in a trenchcoat while techno music plays. That’s almost as risible as Blucas’ narration, which is as stiff and lifeless as the actor’s performance. Blucas isn’t the only one guilty of uninspired acting, but then again, there’s not much in the script to work with. The film never delves into the history or backstory of these “predators,” and the characters are shallow and lack chemistry. There’s no

depth to Jarrett or the dilemma he gets caught up in, and I never bought his struggles coming to terms with the animal inside. It’s a weak metaphor that is superficially secondary to the movie’s sex, nudity and creature attack scenes.

About the only thing I liked about ANIMALS was the nudity. No, Blucas’ ass didn’t do it for me; unfortunately, his tuchus is on display so much here that I’m pretty sure I could pick it out of a police lineup. However, I had no problem with the copious copulating scenes showcasing Aycox’s derriere and other female parts. There’s even a 9 1/2 WEEKS-style, physics-defying carnal act that takes place against a wall in the rain. Mickey Rourke—now that was an ass back in the day! OK, moving on…

If you couldn’t care less about seeing either Blucas or Aycox’s “ass”-ets and come to ANIMALS in search of sensational creature and carnage moments, you’ll be sorely disappointed. The bloodshed is forgettable, and the final fight between the CG-looking beasts is disastrous. Truly awful. The “predators” aren’t frightening in the least; they’re funny-looking. Remember SHOCKER’s Horace Pinker taking the form of a killer energy source? That’s kinda what these things reminded me of. They’re worse than the werewolf in SILVER BULLET. So do yourself a favor: If you want to see ANIMALS, go to a zoo. OK, now that I’ve finished my vituperative venting, I can release the beast inside me and go back to being…a snake. I guess after years of scribbling scathing reviews, I’ve lost all of my humanity. Too bad. And I didn’t even get to have sex with a hot werewolf…

{jcomments on}