To the unabashed delight of horror and B-movie fans, Shout! Factory began releasing a series of Roger Corman Cult Classics DVDs and Blu-rays this past spring, delivering long-anticipated and in some cases impossible-to-find favorites such as HUMANOIDS FROM THE DEEP, FORBIDDEN WORLD and GALAXY OF TERROR. We’ll be catching up with them all this week, and we begin with one of the discs that bundles a pair of lesser-known, thematically similar flicks as double features.

The haunted-house twofer THE EVIL (1978) and TWICE DEAD (1988) are a pair of low-budget independent productions bought and distributed by Corman’s New World and Concorde companies, respectively. The former film begins with atheist psychologist C.J. Arnold (Richard Crenna) scouting for a suitable remote location to realize his ambition of founding a leading-edge drug-rehabilitation facility. Accompanied by his wife (Joanna Pettet), he is shown a huge, abandoned mansion which he immediately buys—despite a ridiculous number of clear indications why this wouldn’t be an ideal spot for anything other than virgin sacrifices and demonic possession.

During the initial inspection, it is disclosed that in the past the local Indians avoided the valley where the building was constructed, and years later the neighboring town wanted it burned down because they believed it was an unholy place. Add to that the strange statue with an ominous warning sitting on the front lawn, a missing handyman, the roof falling in on the doctor’s head and the ghost that manifests itself in front of his wife, and you have the *perfect* locale for a clinic intended to treat fragile substance abusers. Apparently, C.J. never saw or paid attention to an episode of SCOOBY-DOO.

Soon after Arnold signs the papers, he’s joined by a small handful of colleagues and patients

eager to renovate the dusty old building, which inadvertently leads to the opening of a cross-sealed crypt in the basement. This act unleashes a malevolent force upon the group, seriously harshing the rest of their evening and—even worse—forcing the doctor to face the unfathomable: that his steadfast lack of religious faith looks to be on extremely shaky ground.

Gus Trikonis’ direction is adequate, and for the most part the cast make the best of the script by Donald Thompson. Crenna is standard Crenna, Andrew Prine gives a solid performance as his protégé, Victor Buono’s facial hair (when he shows up at the end as the devil) is terrifying and Lynne Moody gives a very impressive physical performance in a demon-attack sequence, doing her own stunt work. Joanna Pettet maintains the same frozen look of mild concern throughout the entire film regardless of what’s transpiring at the time, while Mary Louise Weller (next seen in ANIMAL HOUSE) passes the time without much to do.

Where this movie does find its legs is in the imaginative and effective cinematography of Mario Di Leo. The interiors and exteriors of the grand old structure in which almost all of the story takes place (beyond a couple of early scenes taking place at a university) were well-utilized. On the DVD commentary, the filmmakers take great pride in the fact that all of the FX were shot live (with the exception of some electrocution visuals that were created by scratching the film negative), including an interesting “smoke and mirrors” technique used to create the shimmering ghost that occupies the mansion.

But while the film looks great, the writing leaves a lot to be desired. The intended heady good-vs.-evil narrative is overwrought and forced, and though the demon in the basement feeds on fear and despair and can manipulate elements in and around the house, it doesn’t occur to this evil being to exploit the fact that there are ex-drug addicts present. It would rather invisibly slap an ex-junkie around like a shortchanged pimp than use the temptation of drugs and feed on the ensuing despair. An electrician/handyman dies in the first of three (!) electrocution deaths in a scene that was likely intended to be ironic, but instead brings to mind the cartoonish slow-moving steamroller crushing in AUSTIN POWERS. At one point following an unfortunate incident, Crenna’s C.J. forcefully commands the group to stay together, and under no circumstances is anyone to go wondering off in the building alone—and in the very next frame, C.J. is seen wandering around the building…alone. It’s evident that the filmmakers were trying to achieve a moody progressive dream state where style would outweigh substance, but the silly chain of events are just too jarring to allow the viewer to get completely immersed in the movie. THE EVIL somehow received an R rating despite the fact that it’s relatively bloodless and contains no foul language or nudity, but its worst crime is to set the audience up for a big climax that never comes.

The special features consist of a few trailers and a commentary, by Trikonis, Thompson and Di Leo. Their talk is fairly amusing—three cronies trying to recall the details of a movie through a 30-year fog under the moderation of Walter Olsen. The latter asks several awkward questions in an attempt to keep the ball rolling, but it constantly hits the wall as Trikonis repeatedly admits he can’t remember much about the film or most of the actors in it. Di Leo fares better, still able to share detailed and heavily accented recollections of the cinematography.

Once you’ve refilled your popcorn bowl and topped up and re-iced your drink, it’s time to fire up the second feature. TWICE DEAD, directed and co-written by Bert L. Dragin, starts in much the same way most haunted-house movies do (including our previous feature): with a killing on the site to provide an early shock, history and foreshadowing, before we meet a new family in their car yukking it up on the way to their new digs, blissfully unaware of the fate that awaits them.

In the case of the Cates family, it’s not only an apparition that will threaten them at a huge, decrepit mansion; there is also a gang of violent thugs who have laid claim to the vacant house as their hangout, and aren’t too keen on the idea of handing over the keys to the rightful owners. A further layer of conflict is added when one of the colorful gang of squatters takes an unrequited shine to the family’s daughter, much to the chagrin of her protective brother. Before you can ask, “Where’s the cat?”, events escalate out of control with the punks, and after a fun but predictably ineffective attempt by the Cates kids to strike back, the manor’s spectral denizen makes its presence known with a far heavier hand.

This film works a little harder for its R rating, dishing out a couple of scenes of gore—following the popular ’80s “imaginative kills” formula—as well as a brief glimpse of silicone-enhanced nudity. Nothing outrageous enough for the hardcore gorehounds, but a little tidbit here and there to spice things up for the average fan. The Cates family is headed by father Harry (Sam Melville, who passed away a year after the film was completed) and mother Sylvia (Brooke Bundy of A NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET 3 and 4) for the scant few minutes in which they appear on screen. Boyish Tom Bresnahan and fresh-faced Jill Whitlow (the heroine of NIGHT OF THE CREEPS) portray son Scott and daughter Robin, while DIFF’RENT STROKES’ Todd Bridges makes an appearance as Petie, the siblings’ new school pal who becomes involved in their predicament. As far as the criminal element goes, this flick takes a page right out of THE RETURN OF THE LIVING DEAD and throws together the most unlikely selection of bad eggs you’d ever find: Latino punks, biker thugs and “new romantics” working together for the common bad via equal opportunity gang-banging.

In all, TWICE DEAD is not a bad little film that doesn’t seem to take itself too seriously, and delivers pretty much what you would expect given the parameters the filmmakers had to work

with. The extras here include a short visit with Whitlow in which she answers a series of unheard questions by an unseen interviewer—cute, but not terribly dynamic. The commentary is a little more lively, with Dragin and Bresnahan once again moderated by the increasingly hapless Olsen. The highlights are Bresnahan’s repeated drooling over co-star Whitlow in a less-than-brotherly fashion and Olsen impotently asking innocuous questions in an attempt to elicit anecdotes from the participants. There is an uncomfortable but humorous moment where Bresnahan loses patience and snaps at Olsen after the latter mistakenly refers to SKI SCHOOL, another film he starred in, as SKI PATROL one too many times.

BOTH MOVIES: 💀💀💀💀

DVD PACKAGE: 💀💀💀💀

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